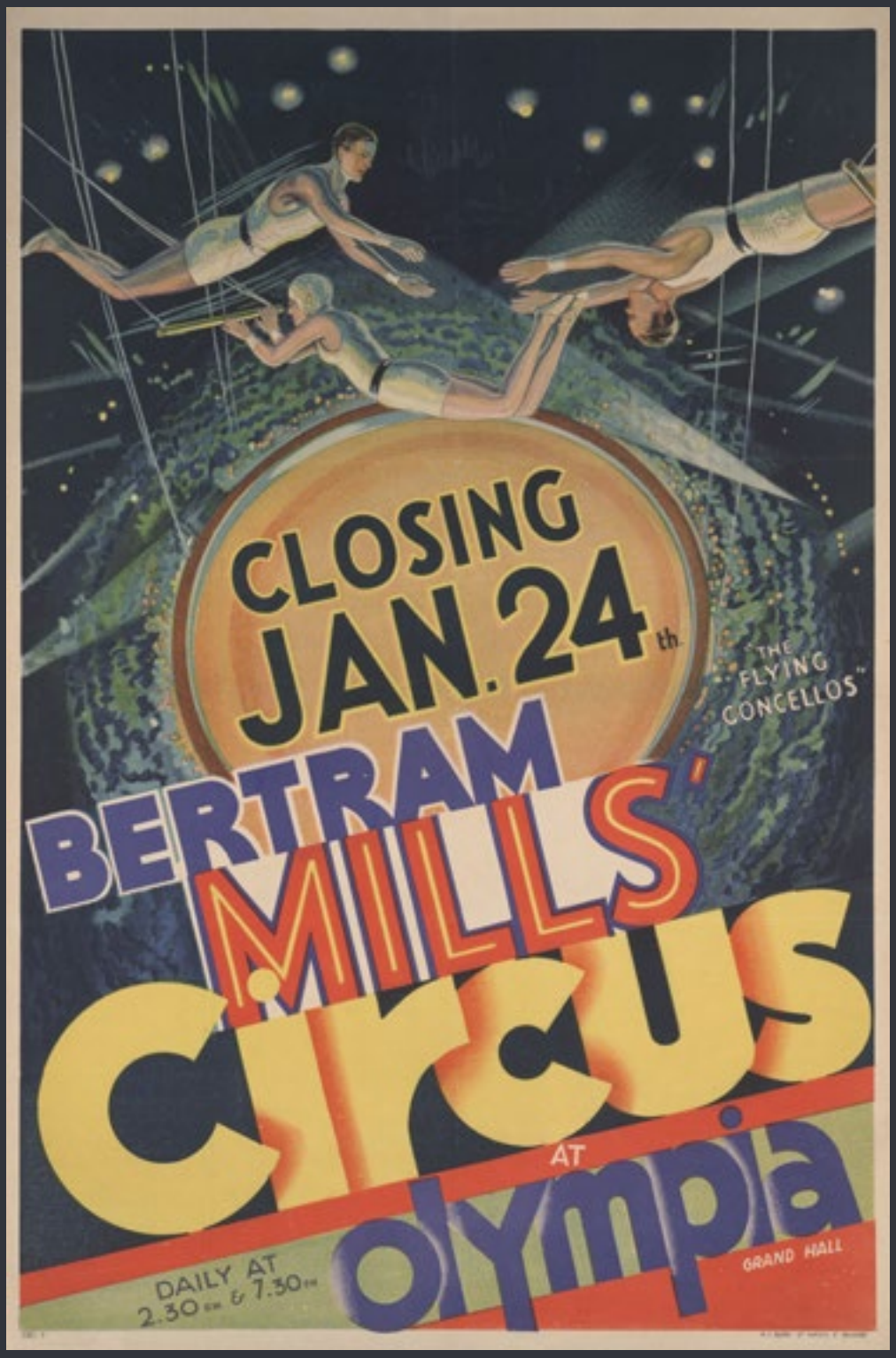
Bandwagon

The Journal of the Circus Historical Society Vol. 67 No. 2 2023



Courtesy of The Ringling, Tibbals Circus Collection, ht2004232

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Bandwagon: The Journal of the Circus Historical Society (USPS 406-390) (ISSN 0005-4968) is published quarterly by the Circus Historical Society Inc. for its members. © 2023

OFFICE OF PUBLICATION

1075 West Fifth Avenue, Columbus OH 43212. Periodical postage paid at Columbus OH and additional entry offices. Postmaster: send all address changes to Bandwagon: The Journal of the Circus Historical Society, 1075 West Fifth Avenue, Columbus OH 43212.

MEMBERSHIP

Circus Historical Society annual membership is $60.00 in the United States, $80.00 in Canada and for U.S. First Class, and $105.00 for international members. Membership applications and information are available on the CHS website at circushistory.org or contact
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An index of Bandwagon articles from earlier issues is available online at circushistory.org. Back issues are available from the Office of Publication. Members can also purchase back issues from the members' only website at: backyard.circushistory.org

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From the Editor

I am thrilled to be able to bring you this issue of *Bandwagon*, it is full of fascinating biographical profiles, unique artwork, and a behind the scenes look at what it takes to write a book about a circus legend.

Chris Berry brings us the unique history and provenance of a beautiful collection of rare circus maquettes.

Building on their presentation from the 2022 Convention, Patrick and Heather Bracy delve into the history of female circus owner Rose Kilian and her struggles and triumphs as she contemplates the future of her show in the early twentieth century.

Maureen Brunsdale shares the origin story and research process for her new book, *In the Shadow of the Big Top: The Life of Ringling's Unlikely Circus Savior*. Along with her compelling narrative about what it took to bring the life of Art Concello to print, there are multiple never before published photographs I am sure you will enjoy.

This issue also brings the final installment of two extensive multi-part profiles. From Lane Talburt we have the eighth and final chronicle of circus owner John Pugh, the article bringing us the story of the final years of his extensive career. Timothy Noel Tegge brings us the closing chapter of his five-part series on the incomparable Miss Loni. Both series have made meaningful contributions to the study and preservation of circus history, providing previously uncollected and unpublished first-hand accounts and research for publication for the first time.

Along with the contributions by all of these talented authors this issue would not have been possible without images from the collection of The Ringling Museum, Millner Library Special Collections, Circus World Museum, Tegge Circus Archives, and Potter & Potter auctions, as well as many of the authors personal collections. I am also indebted to Fred Pfening and Fred Dahlinger, for making both their collections and expertise available to support articles in this issue. Finally, Chris Berry's work as the Associate Editor was instrumental in bringing this issue together, and it would not be as rich without his efforts.

Write for *Bandwagon*!

What We Are Looking For
Bandwagon welcomes proposals for articles on topics about circus history in the following formats:

Long-form feature articles:
8,000 - 15,000 words or longer

Short feature articles:
2,500 – 5,000 words

Quick Reads:
700-1000 words

Photo and Image Essays: A collection of images, such as photographs or posters with a short introduction providing background and context.

Articles topics of interest include, but are not limited to, biographical portraits of circus performers and other circus professionals, circus business and logistics, the history or evolution of specific circus acts, and circus and its connection to other cultural institutions.

How to Pitch
Please send a short summary of the article you wish to write to Kat Vecchio, *Bandwagon* Editor, at editor@circushistory.org.

Include information about any images you have, or that you have identified in archival collections, which could appear with the article.

If you have not previously written for *Bandwagon*, please also include a short bio with your proposal.

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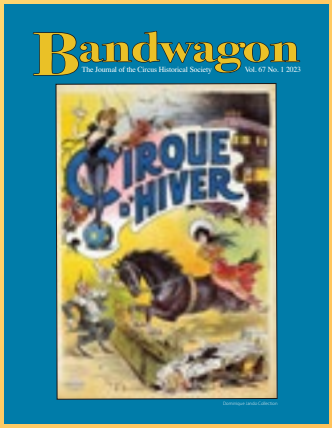
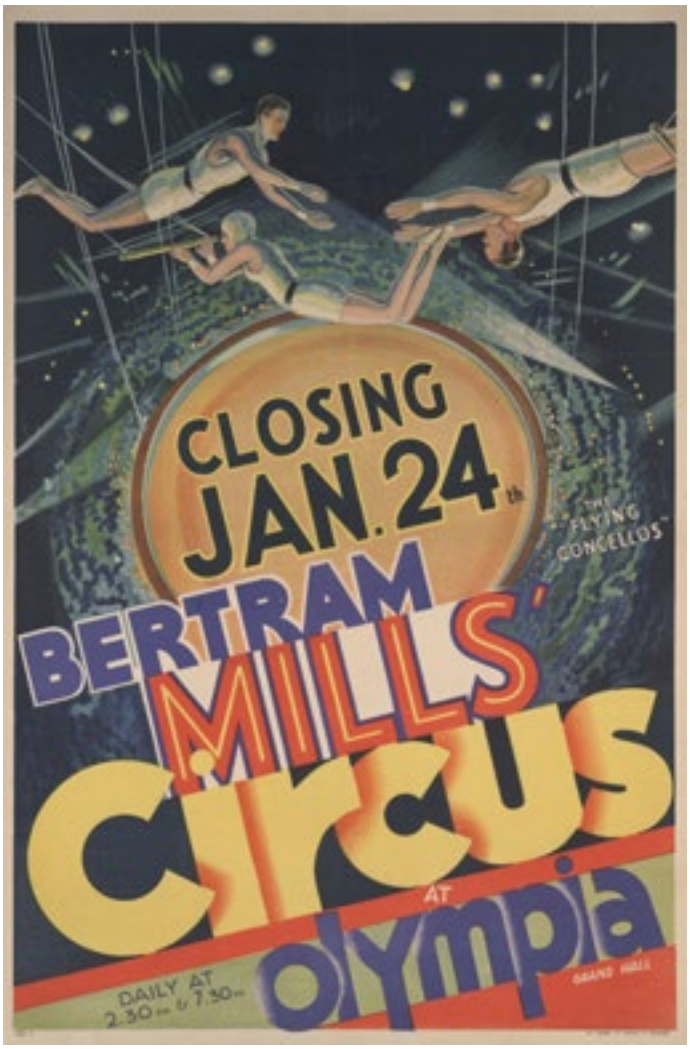
The Journal of the Circus Historical Society
Vol. 66 No. 2 2022
THE BARNUM & BAILEY GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH
SOLDIERS



About the Covers

Both of the cover images for this issue of *Bandwagon* were chosen as a nod to this year's convention location in the towns of Bloomington and Normal, Illinois. The Bertram Mills Circus played a Christmas show at the Olympia in London, and Mills was known for only selecting the very best acts. The Flying Concellos featured on the poster certainly fit that directive. Cyril Mills signed the Concellos for his father's 1932-1933 winter circus, details Maureen Brunsdale, in her book *In The Shadow of the Big Top: The Life of Ringling's Unlikely Circus Savior*. However, while Mills was known for booking the best, he was also ruthless when it came to cutting acts. When Art Concello did not complete his contractually obligated triple somersault, at either the rehearsal or on opening night, Mills cut the act. The Concellos would appear again with Bertram Mills Circus in the winter of 1934-1935, and this time the act remained on the program.[1] The image on the back cover, which also appears within the issue as part of Maureen's article "The Publication Odyssey for In the Shadow of the Big Top: The Life of Ringling's Unlikely Circus Savior" shows Art years earlier sitting on a trapeze bar in his backyard in Bloomington, Illinois in the late 1920's.

1. Maureen Brunsdale, *In The Shadow of the Big Top: The Life of Ringling's Unlikely Circus Savior*,(Rowman & Littelfield, 2023), 21-22.



Courtesy of The Ringling, Tibbals Circus Collection, ht2004232

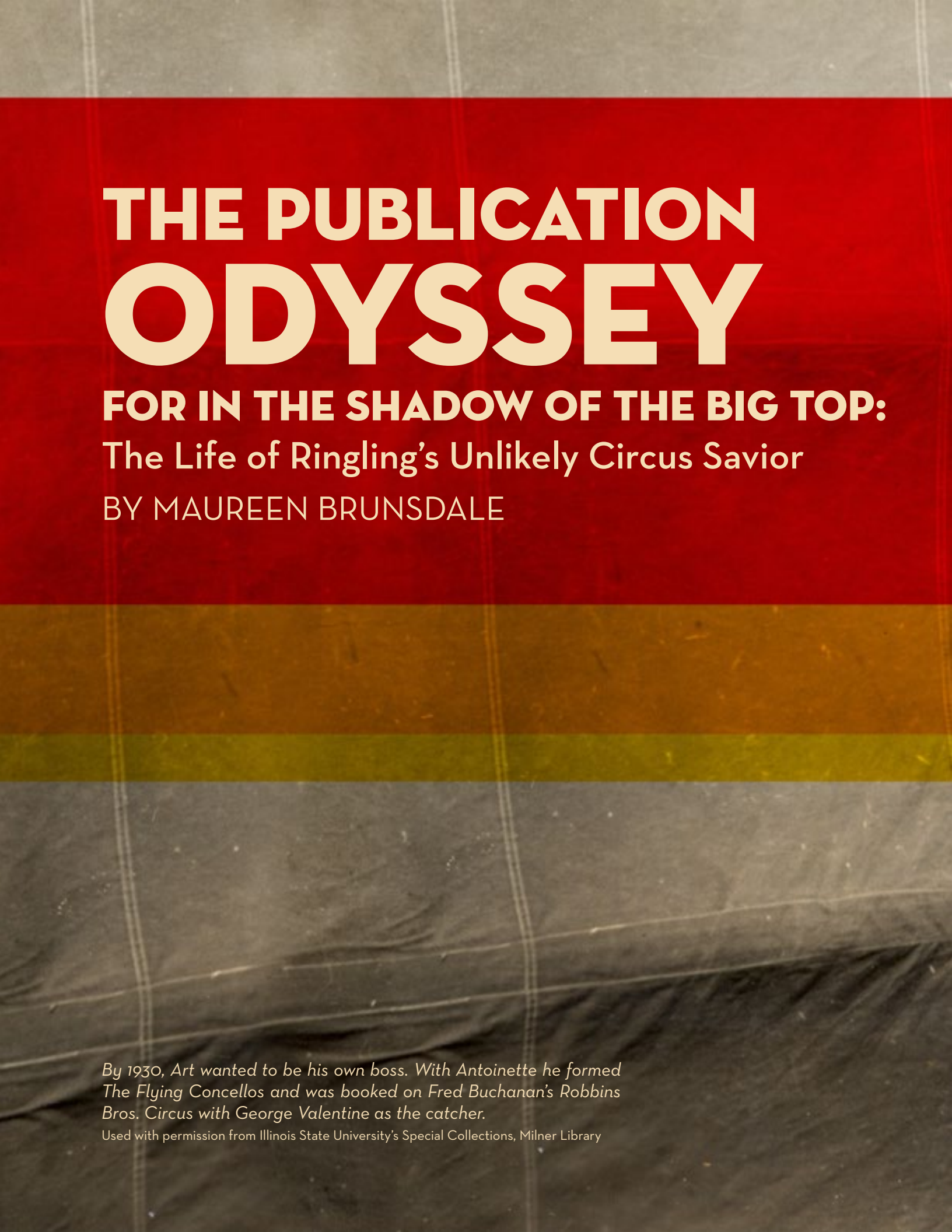
Circus World Museum, Wisconsin Historical Society

THE PUBLICATION ODYSSEY

FOR IN THE SHADOW OF THE BIG TOP:

The Life of Ringling's Unlikely Circus Savior

BY MAUREEN BRUNSDALE



By 1930, Art wanted to be his own boss. With Antoinette he formed The Flying Concellos and was booked on Fred Buchanan's Robbins Bros. Circus with George Valentine as the catcher.

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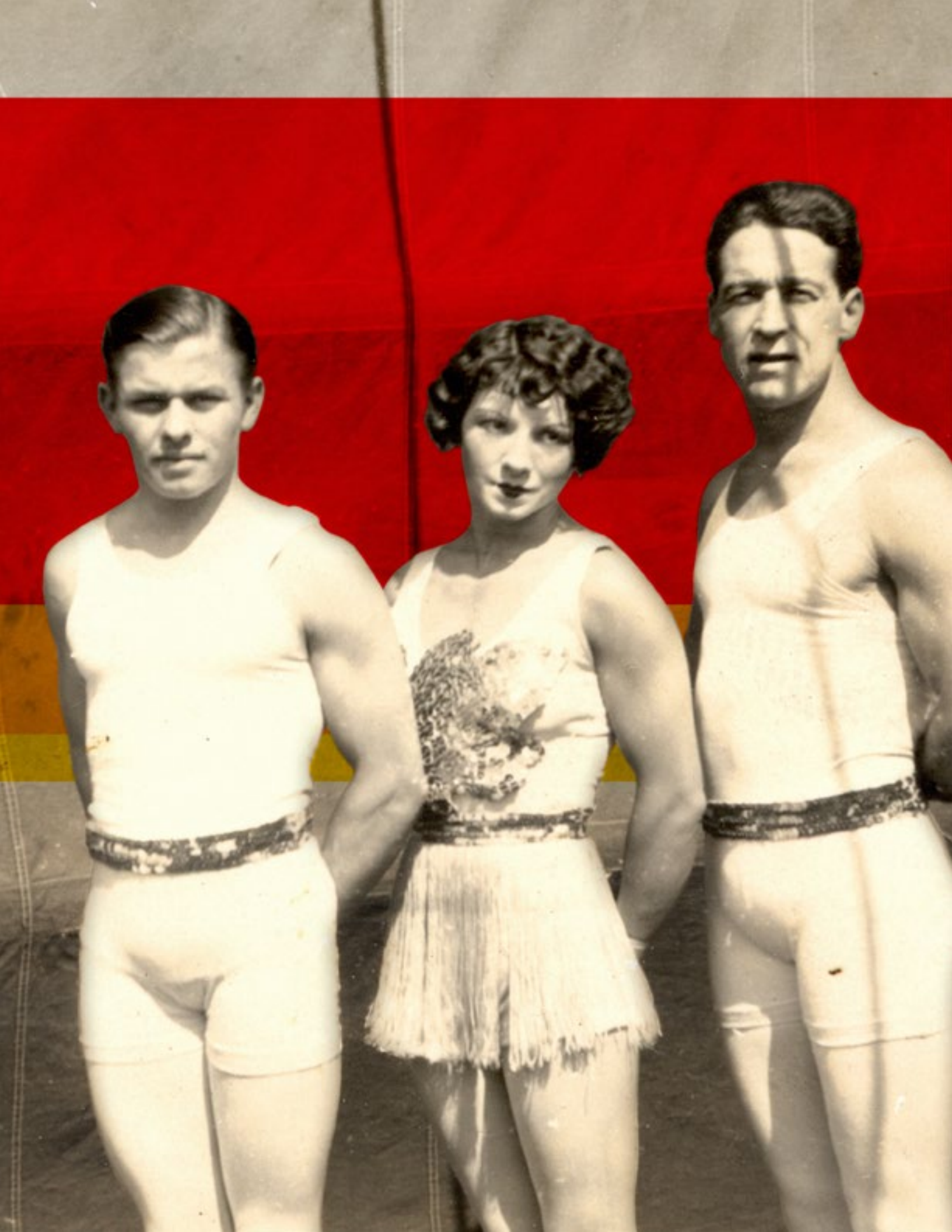

Bandwagon readers may recall a 2017 article about Art Concello titled "'Little Caesar': The Secret Life and High-Flying Times of Art Concello." That article documented my collaboration with Mort Gamble to bring Concello's life out from the shadows and into the hands of readers wanting to know more about the devilish imp turned impresario. No one could have predicted the path our work would take to get published. This article will outline a bit of that history, a little about the process, and will include never before published images.

Art sits atop a bar his father rigged up in his backyard at 801 W. Locust Street, Bloomington, circa 1927. Though the house no longer exists, the one in the background remains. This photograph, along with diaries, canceled checks, and more, was safely removed from the Ward Concello practice barn by Concello in the 1960s.

Circus World Museum, Wisconsin Historical Society.

"When are we going to write something together?" This was the question Mort, a columnist for *The White Tops,* respected author of book reviews, articles, essays, and features on circus and its history, often asked me whenever our paths crossed.

The last time I heard it was at a Popular Culture Association meeting in New Orleans. I first met Mort while grabbing a bite to eat with Dom Yodice in Grand Rapids for the 2010 Circus Fans Association of America convention. New to the world of spangles, I was listening to Dom's circus fan origin story when Mort sat down, listened for a while, and then quietly noted that I wasn't a native Illinoisan. Laughing, I told him I grew up on a farm in North Dakota and he probably wouldn't know the closest town to it. As it turned out, I was wrong. He not only knew Mayville, but he had also visited it when his close friend assumed the reins of presidency at the local university.

By 2015's visit to The Big Easy, I was ready with a reply to his oft-repeated query. I suggested doing something with Bloomington, Illinois' most famous circus alum, Art Concello and his wife, Antoinette. As the librarian overseeing the Circus & Allied Arts Collection at Illinois State University in Normal, the twin city to Art's hometown, I was aware of his curious history and believed there were likely more interesting stories to uncover. Mort listened to my pitch with a wry smile and suggested we write a book together. That that sent a shiver of fear though me.

I was scared because writing isn't my strength nor my happy place. I learned while working on my first book with colleague Mark Schmitt that doing research was my passion. It's something I get excited about because I'm confident about my abilities and there is always more to learn. Mort likely saw my panic and allayed my fears with an offer: He would write, I would research. More specifically, he proposed drafting chapters based on my research. After sharing drafts, we negotiated the editorial process together through emails and phone calls. The agreement was ideal from my perspective because it supported both of our passions. I started researching immediately.

We wanted as much the personal or first-hand accounts as possible for both Art and Antoinette, or Tony, as she called herself. To encourage this, we presented a paper about them at the Circus Historical Society's Sarasota meeting in 2016. To expand our reach, we followed our presentation with the *Bandwagon* article in 2017. Throughout, I shipped boxes of photocopied articles found in *The Billboard* and newspapers, along

C.D. Curtis, Art, and Lyle Summers, 1929. Mayme Ward kicked Art out of the Flying Wards act after Art and Antoinette secretly wed in May in Detroit. Back in Bloomington, Art connected with his mentor and boyhood friend to form this act which likely did not perform outside of central Illinois.

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These next three images date from 1932 when the Concellos were performing in Berlin. The Amadoris and the Codonas, both trapeze acts, were with them at Berlin's Scala theater. The catcher for the 21-year-old Concello was Bloomingtonian Everett White (a section of Bloomington, White's Place, is named for his grandfather).

Used with permission from Illinois State University's Special Collections, Milner Library

with copies of documents found both locally and at the Robert L. Parkinson Library and Research Cener at Circus World.

I arranged all the items chronologically after abstracting everything. I critiqued drafts of chapters about lives of the flying trapeze pair and sometimes challenged what I read – never for grammar or construction. His writing was lively and lovely.

I made three research trips to Baraboo where so many fantastic things were found! Much of the earliest stuff came from the Bloomington barn that Concello used as a training site for flyers. The barn was originally built by the brother and sister act, The Flying Wards, and had been used by Art as a storage space for financial records – bank statements, payroll ledgers, etc – and pictorial and printed documentation from his time as a young flyer through his ownership of the West Coast-based Russell Bros. Circus, whose title morphed annually until his eventual return to the Ringling-Barnum fold in 1947.

Telegrams from this period were particularly enchanting. On the back of one, and in Art's scrawl, are instructions on how to drive from Illinois to Redfield, South Dakota after Ringling's 1938 labor strike in Scranton. (On my bucket list is to follow the roads he took to get to the town south of Aberdeen!)

Another telegram related his excitement opening a show in Mexico City with John Ringling North and Norman Bel Geddes in 1942 – something that never came to pass. Several of them document his ever-tightening friendship with Jack Tavlin, a questionable character who seemingly enjoyed beating the hell out of people he deemed worthy of such treatment – people like the detectives hired by the circus to keep any kind of disorder to a minimum.

This publicity photo features Vera Bruce, Antoinette and Ginevra Amadori with the first Black heavyweight boxing champion of the world, Jack Johnson.

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Antoinette hurt her shoulder in a fall while at the Scala in Berlin. Ginevra Amadori took her place in The Flying Concellos. I believe Art's expression relays his feelings about the matter.

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The tripler, Art Concello, atop the pedestal rise in this undated image. His wife spent years trying to do what so few men could do. She finally succeeded in Detroit's Shrine Circus in 1937.

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Art and Karl Wallenda spearheaded an effort to demonstrate loyalty among the performers and others to John and Henry Ringling North during the 1938 strike struck in Scranton, Pennsylvania. This image shows a scroll held at the bottom by Bob Mussleman (of Bloomington's Flying Fishers) with hundreds of signatures showing that support. Art's signature is absent.

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In the circus' backyard and before he was called to serve in the U.S. Navy during World War II, fellow truant-turned trapeze star Tuffy Genders relaxes with son Curtis, named after the former trapeze coach at the Bloomington YMCA, C.D. Curtis.

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Mort and I had several self-imposed deadlines which were not met for various valid reasons. When the second decade of the twentieth century was less than a month old, I got a text from him saying he was hospitalized with a bad cold that had seemingly lodged in his lungs. He died days later.

The world quickly changed as COVID-19 rampaged. Illinois State University's faculty, staff, and students were sent home to work remotely. Try as I might (and mightily I tried!), I could not emulate Mort's prose to finish the last four chapters.

By June 2020, I realized that if the book was going to get written, I was going to have to scrap everything and start over.

Here's how that worked: I started each day writing. I kept at it until I could not do it any longer. Then I would break away to do something more mundane like laundry or eating. Eventually I would re-read my notes, study and/or update the color-coded event and timeline that graced all of one wall. I paced my apartment and later, when it was determined to be safe to walk outdoors, I did that. I had lots of internal talks

about things like where to take my writing next and how to get the manuscript published. The latter question brought me back to a calmer world, the one that involved research. Eventually I was brought back to writing. Writing, reading, and researching became my daily vicious cycle.

The walls of my office began reminding me of what I believed to be a detective's workspace. Post-it notes, again color coded (red signified the IRS; blue was for RBBB; brown was reserved for the convoluted and complicated man, Jack Tavlin), were everywhere my eyes might try to rest should I look up from my screen. These notes, along with a similarly coded Excel spreadsheet that listed all abstracted sources along with their citations, were meant to remind me of things I should not forget to tuck into the manuscript. Tavlin absconding with more than $40,000 that had been set aside to pay the tax bill topped that list.

Incredible details were supplied by wonderful people like aerialist Mary Jane Miller, animal hand Ted Hoagland, and Kathy Sabino, the bookkeeper/translator for Ringling's Barnum & Bailey 1964 European tour. Together they helped flesh out the power couple of the circus.

I wrote. There was little else I could do. The pandemic forced this solitary confinement. There, in my sewing room-turned office, I became even more grateful for mentors, colleagues, and friends technologically available. Many read drafts of my drivel and made helpful - never painful - suggestions to make the manuscript better. I worked and re-worked and tried my best to bring the Concellos, the two people who seemed to be a part of me now, to life on the printed page.

After about a year I turned my attention to creating the pitch packet. I sent scores of queries. Each agent and publishing house asked for slightly different things. Some simply wanted my curriculum vita along with a personalized cover letter. Many requested the first chapter. Some wanted a couple of chapters along with comparable books already published. For each, however, I highlighted some of the more curious aspects of their lives, like this:

Cole Bros.
Harold Voise's new way of guying out his flying and bar acts is the greatest this writer ever has seen. No blocks or falls, and he has a rachet system so that one man can guy the entire rigging out in five minutes. They said it couldn't be done, but Voise is doing it in a big way.

Art called 1947 his "do nothing" year. We all should have such years! The Billboard blurb documents a bit of what he was doing that summer and Sverre Braathen's candid photo caught him talking it all over with Orrin Davenport and Harold Voise in Rockford, Illinois.

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Like the fictional Brad Braden in The Greatest Show on Earth years later, Art loved to zoom around the backyard in a Jeep. In this photograph from the 1940s, his co-star Antoinette gamely rides shotgun.

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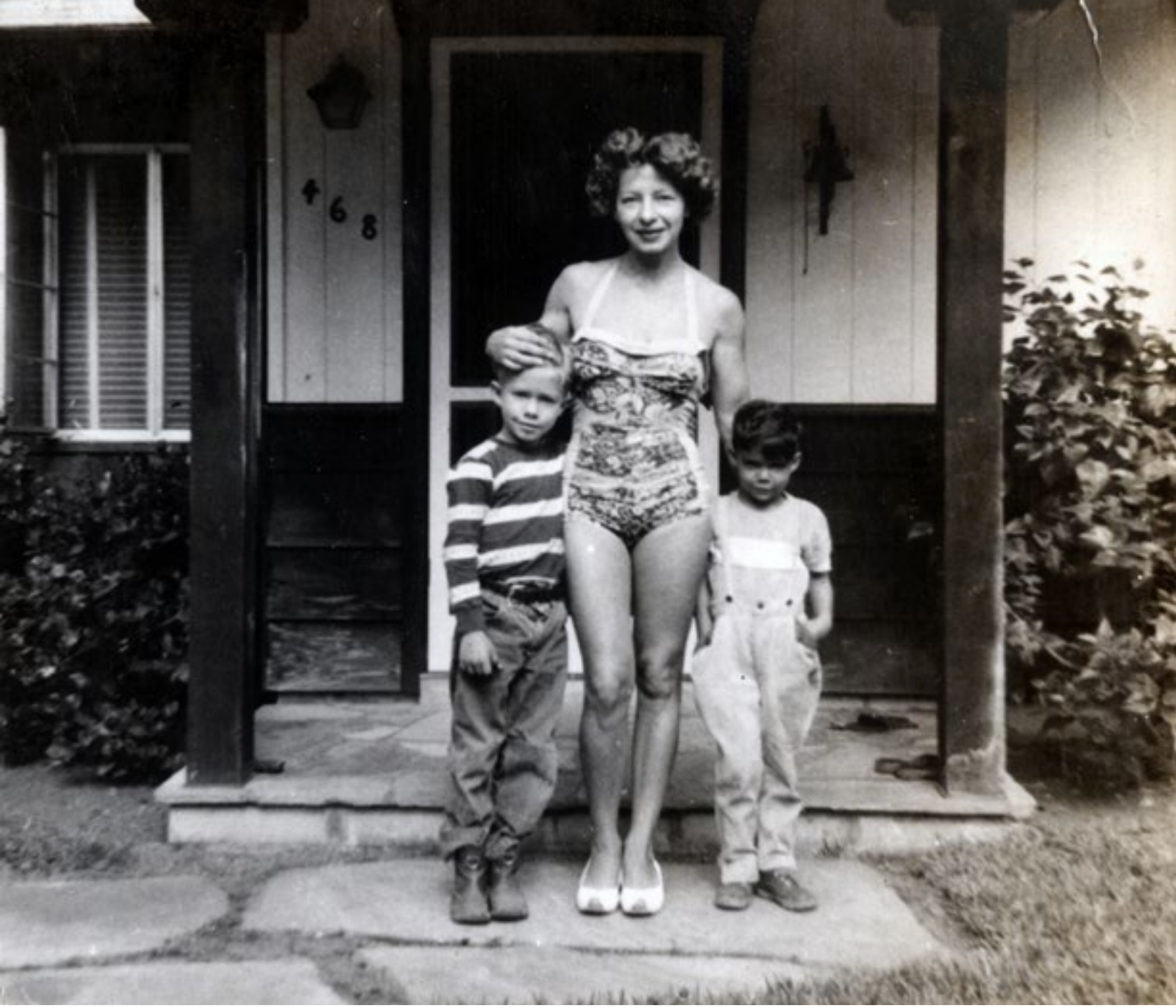

From Antoinette's scrapbook comes this photo of her with Randy (and an unidentified child on her right) outside their Sarasota home.

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Arthur Marshall Vasconcellos grew up in "the Trapeze Capital of the World" and lucky for him, he was a prodigy in the air. Against the backdrop of the American circus this book charts Art's fateful path from flyer to manager, to owner, and more. Money was his driving force, women were his weakness, and circus was his game.

At his side was Antoinette, a French-Canadian orphan-turned-acrobat. A determined social worker sent the abandoned and intellectually curious waif to a boarding school run by nuns who set the child on the path towards a life of service and solitude. Driven by the desire to be the master of her own destiny, and no stranger to luck herself, she ran away with the circus. Once there, she connected with Art in Bloomington and became the first woman to successfully perform the killer trick, the triple somersault. But she wanted more. She sought the exclusive love of her husband and the security of a family who wouldn't desert her. Unlike the trapeze bar, these things evaded her grasp.

In his 1961 datebook Art noted, "They gave me a photo of myself and a cup" when the cast and crew of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey presented him with those gifts. The oil painting hung in the living room he shared with Margaret Smith until she gifted it to Milner Library.

Used with permission from Illinois State University's Special Collections, Milner Library

Antoinette taking a bow after dropping bars for The Flying Gaonas in the 1970s.

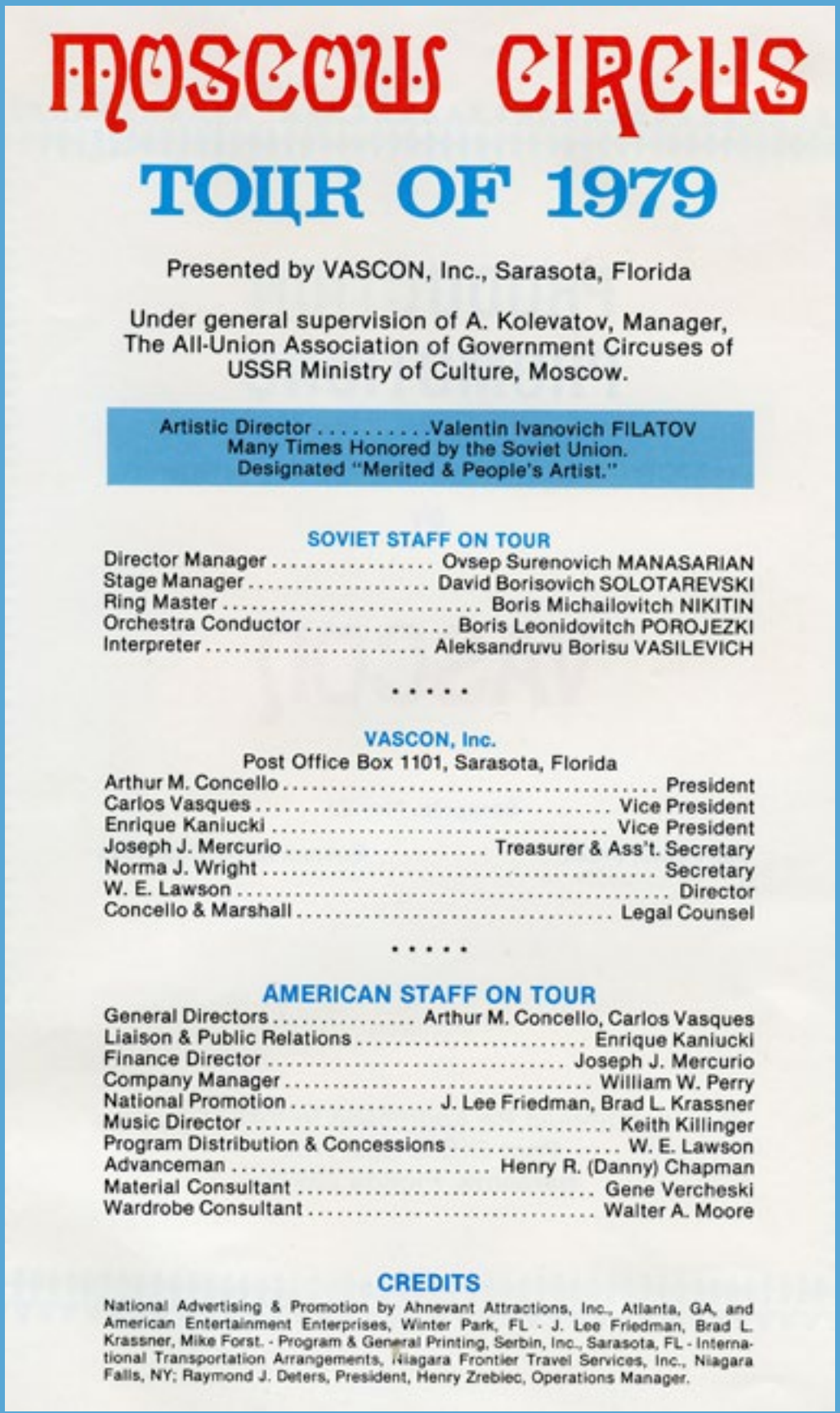
Used with permission from Illinois State University's Special Collections, Milner Library

On a cold January day while I was in North Dakota visiting my father, an acquisitions editor at Rowman & Littlefield reached out to tell me that they wanted to publish the manuscript for a general audience. They asked that I cut 10,000 words from the manuscript which topped 100,000. They wanted about twenty photographs, an index, and cited sources. They needed signed permission forms from interviewees and releases for images used. These things I was happy to do, pursue, and supply.

The images reproduced here were not included in the manuscript. With one exception, all come from Milner Library's Circus & Allied Arts Collection, Illinois State University.

The book was released May 10 and is available through all major booksellers. I am indebted to so many people, many who may now be reading this. After Mort passed away, Jean MacDonald, my twin sister, earnestly and frankly pushed me to finish what had been started. The family joke is that I inherited all of my father's Irish genes while she got all his Norwegian ones. Her Viking eyes conveyed a laser's intensity that propelled me. Special Collections' manager Mark Schmitt consistently helped and encouraged me. An early example: it was his idea to create an Excel document for the 2000+ abstracted sources. As usual, he was right. It saved me time and time again. Fred Pfening III generously gave of his time to talk about circus history and Concello's role within it. As the best teachers do, he questioned lots and pushed me past the limits of what I thought was possible to understand and share. Jim Dexheimer's masterful and insightful understanding of the Ringling family knit so well with John Ringling North II's fabulous memory of the little man with the big cigar.

There are more to thank: Aíne Norris and her network, Les Smout's enthusiasm, Kristin Lee's belief, Fred Dahlinger's comment years ago that Concello's life was worthy of a book…well, the list goes on and on! There simply aren't enough words to convey my gratitude but let me start with the highest and most effusive version of thanks heard on the streets of my hometown while I was growing up: *mange tusen takk*. It translates (from Norwegian) as many thousands of thanks. Somehow, there's more gravitas in offering my thankfulness in the language of my youth.



MOSCOW CIRCUS

TOUR OF 1979

Presented by VASCON, Inc., Sarasota, Florida

Under general supervision of A. Kolevatov, Manager,
The All-Union Association of Government Circuses of
USSR Ministry of Culture, Moscow.

Artistic Director . . . . . .Valentin Ivanovich FILATOV
Many Times Honored by the Soviet Union.
Designated "Merited & People's Artist."

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• • • • •

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The Moscow Circus' 1979 tour was Art's last circus-related venture. Note the name of the company heading it all up, VASCON, a shorted form of the last name he never legally changed, Vasconcellos.

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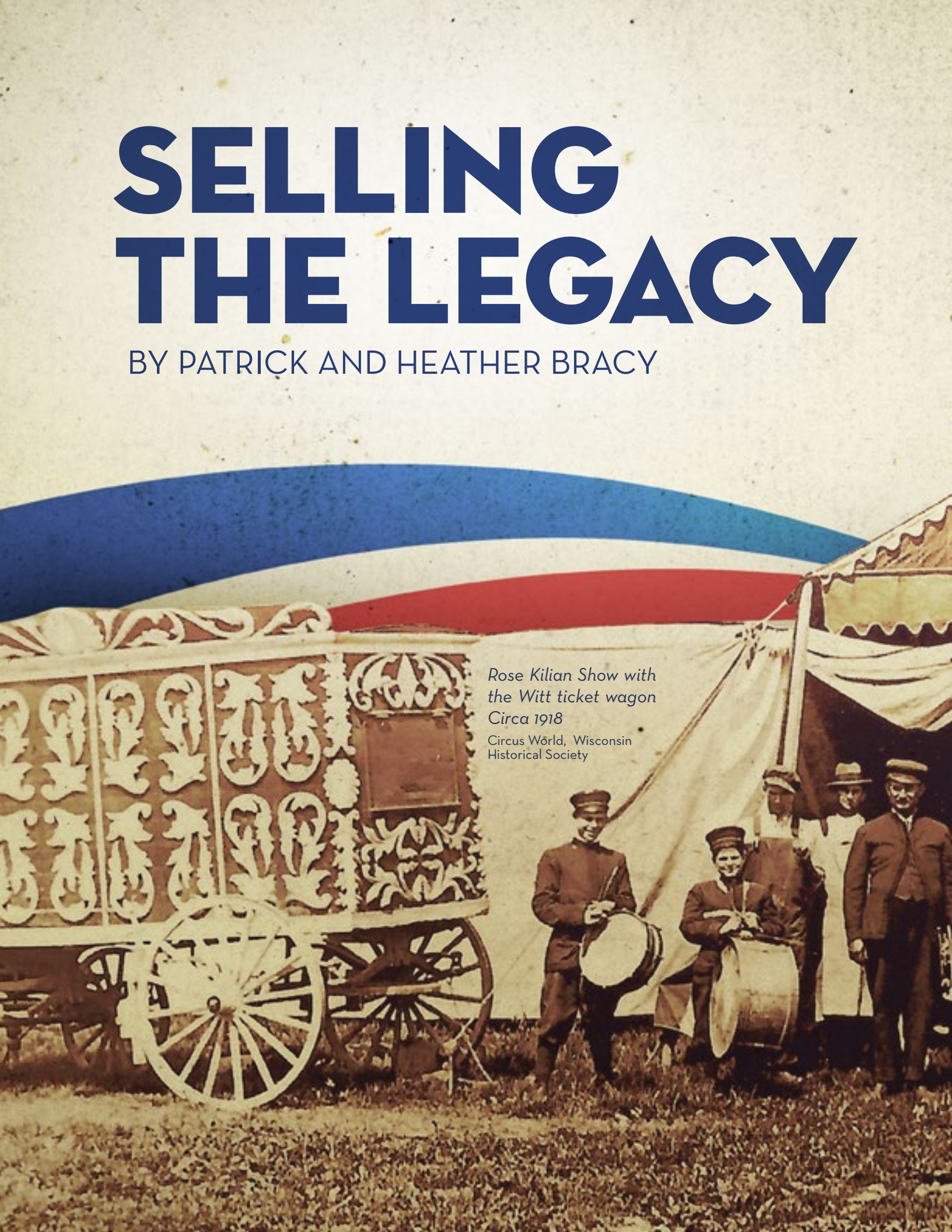
SELLING THE LEGACY

BY PATRICK AND HEATHER BRACY



Rose Kilian Show with the Witt ticket wagon Circa 1918

Circus World, Wisconsin Historical Society

ROSE KILIAN
SHOWS

In the early morning hours of April 15, 1918, Rose Kilian woke bleary-eyed from her sleeper wagon to a light frost that had been plaguing cotton growers in the area just outside of Graceville, Florida. The day before was a Sunday and she was in the habit of observing rest from the rigorous daily show schedule, but she did not sleep well given the task at hand that morning. She lit her lamp and opened the lap desk to retrieve Rose Kilian Shows letterhead with her picture and the words "SOLE PROPRIETOR". Rose had the distinction of being the first woman to both found and operate a circus as sole proprietor in the United States.

Agnes Lake was actually the first woman to own a circus, but it has been started by her husband William and she operated it for an additional three years after he was shot and killed on the showgrounds.[1]

In addition, Mollie Bailey was another famous female owner who had also started a circus with her husband, Gus. After he died, she continued to manage the show for twenty-two years after his death.[2]

Rose not only founded the overland wagon show herself, but she also operated it continuously for twenty-three consecutive years playing small towns, sometimes every crossroad in a county. Her route consisted entirely of short jumps, usually eight-to-twenty miles apart, that were neglected by larger outfits which focused on big cities that were accessible by rail. Graceville was near the Alabama border, but more than 200 miles from larger cities like Atlanta, Birmingham, or Jacksonville where larger circuses would perform that year. Depending on weather and road conditions, a citizen of Graceville who was interested in seeing a big show would need to travel several days by wagon or more than eight hours by rail on the Dixie Line.

That very day in Chicago, April 15, 1918, Ringling Bros. was opening its new tour after being in winter quarters.[3] During the time since Ringling ended its season nearly seven months before, Rose continued her Southern route, playing 158 towns that year, as she worked her way through Tennessee, Alabama, and Florida.

Sells-Floto would open a week later in Miami, and her daughter Rosina (Rosa Rosalind) was set to perform on the much larger show as the only somersaulting equestrienne with Hagenbeck-Wallace beginning April 26 in Cincinnati.[4] The Rose Kilian Circus was

Rose Kilian in front of her tent. The Witt built ticket wagon can be seen on the left.
Mabel Smiley Collection

Otto Kilian with the show's mules in 1910.
Mabel Smiley Collection

the good old year-round show, with no layoffs, and no missing salaries as it trouped along[5]. While other shows were just beginning their season, in 1918 Rose Kilian was in the position of ending hers for good.

She had been dreading the decision for the previous eleven months since she learned that her son, Otto was to be drafted into the war effort.[6] "Otto was everything from cookhouse to front door, boss canvasman, blacksmith, drove a four-mule wagon, an acrobat, a stilt dancer, a musician … a good boy."[7]

The departure of Otto would essentially leave Rose by herself. Her husband, John Justus, had long been absent, her daughter Rosina had married an older equestrian, and her adopted son had already been drafted. Now Otto would be departing, and she was getting older and would soon be alone.[8]

Reluctantly, she penned a letter to William P. Hall to sell her entire show, everything for $4,500. The inventory included:

- Canvas: Bran' new 60 ft round top with 35 ft middle, 36 x 48 side show, 24 x 40 stable (used one month), 14 x 14 cookhouse, and two small tents.
- Ten Wagons: Ticket, Sleeper, Stringer, Side Show, Trunk, Cook, Pole, Jack, Advance, Lion Cage.
- Animal Stock: Twenty head of mule, two broke ponies (Mabel & Dollie), two beauties, one riding dog (Dewey), one large monkey (Fijo), and one lion (Prince) in healthy condition.
- Equipment: All harness, lights, poles, seats, and everything to run the show as it stands.

Rose had been contemplating selling out for months and several parties had referred her to the Horse King of the World, William P. Hall as a potential buyer.[9] Hall was a dealer in circus property, wild animals, horses, and mules.[10] His "almost absolute judgement of horse-flesh [had] stood the test of 25 busy years, buying and selling in large numbers every day, making deals by cable 3,000 miles away."[11] Rose knew he had the means and interest, and his decision would be swift, so she only included the show route for the

next week in the letter. She closed the letter with, "This is a great bargain for anyone to invest for a good wagon show. Hoping to hear from you. Very respectively, Mrs. Rose Kilian."[12]

Outside the sleeper, she could hear breakfast being prepared in the cookhouse and the show beginning to wake. The early magnolias in the nearby woods were laden with their fragrance, but she did not notice as she hastily made her way to the cookhouse to find her advance manager.[13] She had a special errand for J.Y. Bronie, that she did not want anyone else to know about. He was to take the letter and have the confidential message wired to Mr. Hall in Lancaster, Missouri.[14] Some would say Rose was a "hard master" as she once fired a contracting agent for paying $12.50 rent for a lot in Winder, Georgia. She told him, "Don't you know Rose Kilian never has to pay for the use of a lot."[15] So Bronie dutifully took the assignment and made his way into town on a mission to sell the show.

After breakfast, Rose checked in on her daughters Mabel and Ruth. Mabel was three months pregnant with her second child. It had only been six months ago that her first, little Johnny, had been scalded by an overturned tub of hot water and buried en route to Huntland, Tennessee.[16] Rose knew how painful it was to bury a child, as her youngest, Myrtle, had died of meningitis in the summer of 1899.[17]

Mabel and her musician husband of four years, John Smiley, were part of the show and would be packing up and getting ready for the street parade.[18] Ruth, Rose's youngest, had a four-year-old son, Johnnie, and a musician husband named Eber Sawyer.[19] Ruth and Eber would come and go having spent the previous year with Clark Brothers as it toured Louisiana.[20] Rose had tried to run off Eber when she first noticed his interest in Ruth as he was divorced for deserting his wife, but she could now see he was devoted to both Ruth and their son.[21]

The regional newspaper had not given Rose press, so the distribution of heralds and the street parade were important for a good turnout in Graceville. When they neared the town, she halted her red and gold-leafed wagons and marched up and down like a drill master lining them up for the great parade. The animal cages were opened so the public could view what they had to offer. Then they rolled down the road as the blast of trumpets from the bandwagon filled the air with contemporary songs.[22]

Rose stood on the lead wagon and waved to the town merchants and called them by their first names. She shouted, 'Boys it's even bigger and better this year.' [23] The crowds that had gathered followed the parade to the lot where the cages were anchored, and the horses, ponies, and little mules munched the hay in the noonday sun.

Soon the small cookhouse was up again and the work of raising the big top began. The small circus was surrounded by a group of 200 ladies and children watching the big top spring up a couple of hours before the doors to the main tent would open at 1 p.m. As the crowd waited, they could buy concessions from the candybutcher or go to the sideshow to see 'Fijo' the man-eating ape or the escape and impalement acts.[24]

Rose was a "tall, skinny woman who could cower a drunken roustabout with a look, or at least with a look and a tent pin, and with a heart as tender as a chicken."[25] Over a cup of coffee in the cookhouse, Rose commented to Charles LaBird, "judging from

Mabel Smiley & Otto Kilian in 1916 with Rose Kilian Shows.
Mabel Smiley Collection

Rose Kilian Shows 1916
Bracy Collection

the crowd on the lot, looks like we are going to lay 'em in for matinee."[26]

Charles "could never forget the time a young kid worked all the morning on the lot for the promise of a pass. After waiting till almost time for the matinee, he could not find the man who had promised him the pass and he began to cry. Rose had seen and went over and asked him what the trouble was. After he told her what had happened, she first took him to the hamburger stand and fed him because she knew he had missed his dinner and then escorted him into the big top herself so he could enjoy the show. That was the true Rose Kilian. She made a friend of that boy for life, and she also knew that he would bring every kid in town to her show the next season and they would pay too."[27]

The ticket wagon was busy with patrons purchasing a seat, thirty-five cents for adults and twenty-five cents for children to see the "best wagon show on the road to entertain the kiddies with funny clowns and fierce animals."[28]

By the start of the two o'clock matinee, the crowd had traded the spring sunshine for the cool shade of the big top canvas with the sides lowered to catch a chance breeze for the first performance. Rose had changed her show name from 'Vaudeville' to 'Musical Comedy Shows,' but she was still giving her audiences acrobatic and aerial acts, as well as equilibristic wonders, and a swinging ladder.[29] The show started with Rose and her daughter Mabel dancing and singing sentimental songs of the day. They were also joined by the rest of the family, Otto and Ruth, who were advertised as 'vocal and instrumental gems.' The next equilibristic act was usually performed by her adopted son 'Herr' George Kilian, but this display had now been replaced by the LaBird Family. The artistic trio of her children Otto, Ruth and Mabel Kilian then offered a paper tearing and crayon artist act from their earlier vaudeville repertoire.

Rose played the character of Frau Kilian, who performed "irresistibly funny German songs, dances, and monologues." Millie Roselle appeared on the dizzy "sailor perch." The program featured "the acrobatic marvels of the Kilian family," which consisted of the aerial trio Rose-Mabel-Otto, as well as LaPetite Ruth on the swinging ladder. These were among the acts that made up the one-hour and forty-five-minute performance.[30]

Remembering Her Experience

Rose Kilian had not come from a circus background. She was born in St. Louis June 14, 1870 to immigrant parents.[31] Her father, Gottlieb Weber was German and her mother Christina Hirsche immigrated from Switzerland with her sister, Rosina.[32] By 1872

Rose's family had moved to Chicago where Gottlieb worked as a butcher to support his wife and six children. After Rose married John Justus Kilian in 1888, he worked as a clerk at a hat store while Rose was at home raising children. At twenty-two, Rose attended the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, just after the birth of her third child, Otto.[33] "The cultural and entertainment impact of the Fair was pervasive". [34]

The Chicago World's Fair was the spark for Rose and her four children to begin training in music and dance at a local studio owned by Mrs. Minna Schmidt whose 'Dancing Academies' prepared acts and costumes for vaudeville.[35] Rose remembered Mabel winning dance competitions and cake walks with her sister Rosie. Both the dance studio owner and Rose attended the same church, St. Stephen's Lutheran Church, in a German community in Chicago. Minna once said that the "Chicago World's Fair in 1893 woke [her] up" and that "all the world loves the great game of 'let's pretend."[36]

Music

Rose also made sure that her children could play musical instruments. By six, Mabel was learning to sing, dance, and play the mandolin, and by eight she had learned to play the trumpet.[37] Daughter Ruth played the trombone and Otto played the baritone. By 1900 the Kilian Family had produced a flyer showing the family of six (including John Kilian) in an acrobatic pose. They began trouping with a family act that featured acrobatics, dancing, and trapeze.

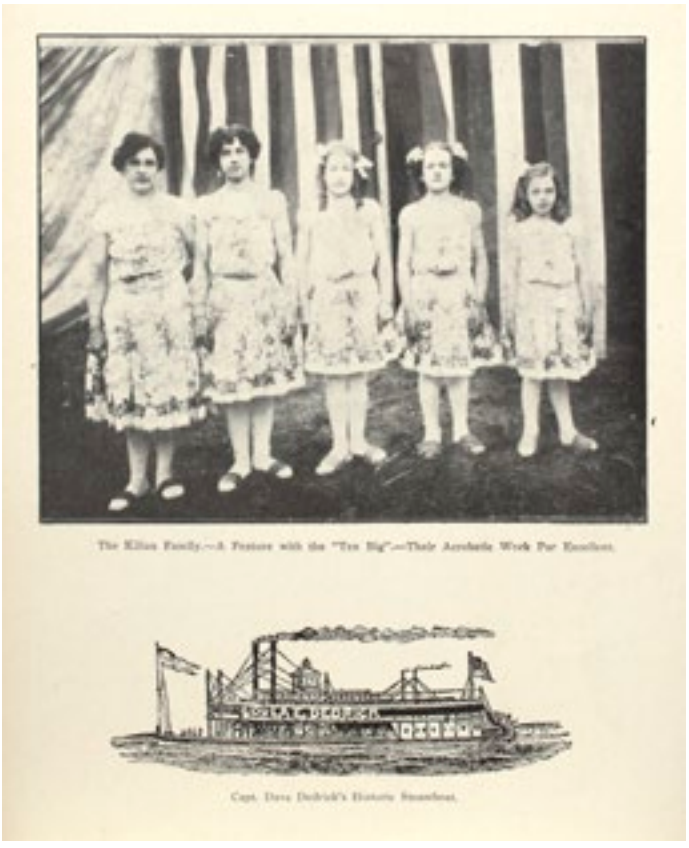
The Kilian family received their first booking with the Great Northern Shows out of Milwaukee.[38] Then in 1901, the family performed on the midway with Mont Moranzo's "American Circus" on the K.G. Barkoot Carnival. Rosina performed the high perch pole act as a free act for the company, and in 1902 the Kilian's were with American Water Circus out of Ironton, Ohio. [39]

During the 1904 season, they added an 'adopted son,' George, to the act, and were signed on with the McDonald Show.[40]

At the end of the season the family returned to Chicago, where daughters Rosa, Mabel, and Ruth performed in the stage play, "A Stranger in a Strange Land" at the Bush Temple. During the engagement the show manager, H. Feigenbaum was warned by the state factory inspector that the children must no longer appear because they were under-age. The event made the *Chicago Tribune* and the inspector claimed

Seven-year-old Mabel, and nine-year-old Rosina Kilian, pose in a cake walk dance. Bell Studio, Chicago circa 1899.

Circus World, Wisconsin Historical Societyv



The Kilian Family acrobats in 1905. From left to right, Rose, Rosina, Mabel, Otto, and Ruth.

Circus World, Wisconsin Historical Society

he was going to enforce the law until 'child actors' disappeared from Chicago theaters.[41]

John Robinson

With theatrical appearances forbidden in Chicago, the family signed on with the John Robinson Circus in 1904, and during that time Rose was photographed with her children, including her son Otto, wearing identical dresses.[42] Otto appeared in the act as a female with both long hair and a dress until he was sixteen.

In 1905, Rose and her family joined the Mighty Haag Show, but after a reported falling out, Rose departed leaving her husband behind.[43] The family had been saving money to buy a barge to pull a boat show but when the Kilian Family Musical Comedy Show played in Memphis, the boat sank and they lost everything.[44] At that time the small show consisted of only Rose, three or four working boys and Bill Bradley, a cornet player who left during that first year and moved on to the Fowler Brothers wagon show. The "argument" with Haag (and her husband), in 1905 had been resolved and the five Kilian acrobats and aerialists returned to the Haag Circus in Louisiana in the spring of 1907 where they became a star attraction.[45]

The 'Kilian Sisters', from left to right, Mabel, Rosina, and Otto with long hair 1907.
Bracy Collection

Rose Kilian Shows-Early Years

When the family left the Haag show for a second time later that year, Rose was given a financial boost by a doctor and attorney in Monticello, Kentucky. It was at the Wayne County courthouse that she launched the Rose Kilian Shows.

Kilian's Vaudeville Show ticket, showing the wear from its repeated use.
Bracy Collection

Early on, she had referred to her production as a vaudeville show; "a farce with music."[46] Rose Kilian's Vaudeville Show of 1909 consisted of "equilibristic, trapeze, clowns, singers, dancers, and comedians."[47]

Rose had only been in business a couple of years, so she relied primarily on her own family members to carry the performance, and each of them appeared several times. In addition to acrobatic acts involving rings, single, double and triple bars, ladders and trapeze, the iron jaw was popular, and both of Rose's daughters, Rosina and Mabel were both known for performing the act.

Even after Rose changed her show from 'vaudeville' to 'Musical Comedy Shows', she still delivered some acrobatic and aerial acts, including a swinging ladder.

Rose Kilian started her show with only four wagons (two she bought and two farm wagons she rented). Her tent, made of eight-ounce tobacco canvas, got a hole in it three weeks after she started. By 1914, Herbert L. Witt had built her a second band chariot with two griffins on the side. The show also included a ticket wagon, a "carry us all" carriage for Rose, and a cage wagon for the old lion Romero. All of the wag-

Rosina Kilian performing iron jaw, circa 1907.
Mabel Smiley Collection

ons had sunburst wagon wheels with clickers. Tom Woodward picked up the Witt wagons using show mules from Austinville, Alabama and delivered them to Rose who was three miles away in Decatur.[48] Traveling with an overland show, whether it was horse and wagon or cars, had its challenges. Rural roads made for rough travel and mud and water would slow down travel or bring it to a halt.

Animals

Early on the animals consisted of a sad one-eyed lion, a laughing hyena who had the most dismal chuckle, some performing dogs that were nice, a mangy monkey, an educated mule, an educated pig, and four ponies. Despite the meager menagerie, Rose proved to be a good old soul in spite of her gruff mannish exterior for she had a family acrobatic act that was very clever.[49]

Some seasons were strong while others were weak. The Rose Kilian Shows carried a variety of good acts, but if they left, the show could continue because the Kilian family was able to carry the show.

Troupers with Rose were happy, but there was occasionally the need to replace acts after they moved on to another circus or started a show of their own. Sometimes troupers would leave and return years later. Tom Woodward, who performed with Rose in 1905, described her as having a wonderful personality; fair and honest. He remembered that she would take as many performers and roustabouts as possible to church wherever they would "Sunday" in a town, regardless of what they were wearing at the time. Woodward worked with her for several years, left the show to work for Haag, then rejoined her in 1912 for three more seasons.

The Kilian Show advertised "positively two performances each day," so should Rose ever be forced to cancel an afternoon performance, she would offer up a special show given for the children before the evening show with the price of admission of only one dime. She also promised that a feature of the special show would be feeding the animals.[50]

Otto Kilian in front of the Witt band chariot.
Circus World, Wisconsin Historical Society

Skull Fracture

During a performance at Hominy, North Carolina in 1910, three local boys crawled under the tent without tickets. After being put out by advance agent Jack Brown, one of them, the son of a prominent local farmer, "picked up a rock and hit the showman over the head with it. The injured man's wound was sewed up shortly after, but the skull was fractured, and the brain deadened entirely."[51] Sadly, Brown died from his injuries two weeks later and was buried on the road in Rockford, North Carolina.[52]

Only a couple of months later, after an exhibition in Ansonville, North Carolina, nine "young men of the town ordered the show people to take down their tent and hit the grit". They smashed the light in the front of the tent, attacked the supporting ropes, and "shot many times through the tent where the show people had retired."[53]

Rose decided that she would stay and press charges even if meant losing several days of revenue. She went to Wadesboro the following Monday and swore out a warrant for the nine young men charging them with property damage. The court case attracted a large crowd and the hearing covered almost an entire day. Rose made a very interesting witness. When asked about her husband, she replied that "he was too expensive a luxury for her and that she cut loose from him years ago."[54] In dramatic tones, she also asserted that

John Justus Kilian & Jake the monkey, circa 1920.
Bracy Collection

she had traveled through the states of Kentucky, Tennessee and West Virginia, but she "be dog-gonned if Ansonville wasn't the roughest place she ever struck." As a compromise of the case, the young men agreed to pay Rose fifty dollars and the court fees.[55]

Fifty dollars was also the sum that Otto agreed to pay a family in Cumberland Furnace, Tennessee after a boy was bitten by Jake the monkey in 1913. When the boy's family was paid the sum they agreed to drop all "claims and damages."[56]

Changes on the Horizon

Throughout her career Rose never forgot her humble beginnings, remembering the straw performances, and cancelled shows, as well as the freedom, travel, and hardships she had experienced by operating a circus. Although the matinee audience in Graceville, Florida applauded the efforts of the family, it was all about to change.

Grit, Savvy & Determination

The wire from Rose was delivered to William P. Hall. In twenty-five years Hall had the reputation of never bargaining with a seller or asking a [man] his price. He was known for taking a quick look, making an offer, and then it was "take it or let it go."[57]

Rose knew that whether Hall accepted her proposal to sell out, made a counteroffer, or turned her down flatly, she had options. There would be additional opportunities to sell to other traveling shows or to liquidate the stock and wagons at market.

As the matinee crowd dispersed on that April day, twenty-four-year-old Otto sought an audience with his mother in advance of dinner and the crowds expected for the eight o'clock evening performance.

The Witt band chariot
Mabel Smiley Collection

He could not help but notice that she was distracted for some reason. With just two weeks to go before he had to report for duty, he wanted to assure his mom not to worry and that he planned to come back to her and the show.[58]

Rose had been a hard-working honest woman. She had raised a large family and successfully operated a traveling show in rough country while facing, adversity with a smile. It was moments like this that proved her quite heroic, showing grit, savvy, and determination of the first order.[59] Despite the upcoming challenges, Rose decided to keep the show. She would spend the next year rebuilding the show for when Otto returned.

Where There is a Will, There is a Way

While Otto is away during World War I, Rose expanded the show by hiring more non-family acts, performers, and attractions. Among the additions:

- Captain Bill Williams' untamable two-lion act.
- Colonel Frank Belmont performing canines and ponies.
- The Morrisses iron jaw and impalement act.
- Sid Kridello, bounding wire and comedy juggler
- Mabel and Ruth with a new aerial casting act.
- The Holloway Seven Troupe which replaced the long-time Charley LaBird Family

Rose also brought on Al F. Wheeler, known as a "healer of sick circuses," to nurse the show back to health.[60] He came with a highly-carved ticket wagon where he had concessions and assisted her as manager until he moved on to M. L. Clark & Sons in late 1923.[61]

In addition to his work with the dog and pony act, Frank Belmont, was also hired as equestrian director and to manage the annex with his Wonderland and Wild Animal Arena, a novelty pit show that included Mazy May the snake enchantress and the Simpsons impalement act.

With these new acts and more "sober working men in all departments," Rose also added trucks to the show which moved he enlarged outfit to the lot on-time with an occasional help of mule-power which pulled the trucks out of the Alabama mud. The new motto followed by the troupers was, "where there is a will there is a way."[62]

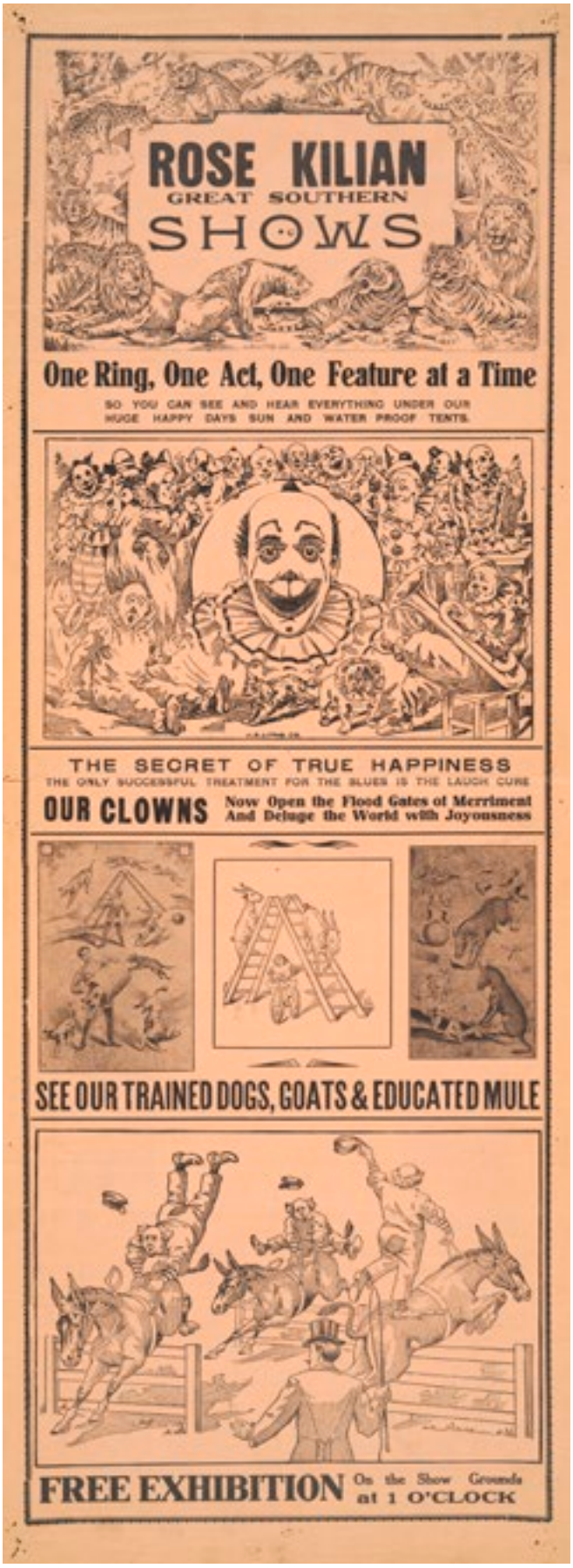
The new trucks enabled the Kilian Shows to travel over the improved roads with what was described as "much system and dispatch as any big railroad show."

> "First came the 'Flying Squadron', which carried the cookhouse, stable tents, and the stake chain wagon. This part of the outfit is carried on trucks and starts out at daybreak. When the baggage train, which has long-eared 'Hayburners' for mode of power arrived in the next town. It finds the cook tent up and a meal ready, the horse tents were up ready to receive the stock, the lot laid out, and the stakes for all the tops driven. [Several] working men were carried by truck to perform this part of the work when the Squadron hits the lot. Next comes the cage train. By the time these arrive, the menagerie top is up and the cages are driven into the menagerie and placed before the teams are unhooked from them." The show is being "greatly enlarged and improved in every way and will be one of the best-equipped wagon shows on the road."[63]

By 1927, Rose moved to have an all-motorized show with more trucks.[64]

The show was rebranded as "Rose Kilian Great Southern Shows." It was said that it was the only circus that did not advertise itself as the "World's Greatest."[65] Rose, instead, billed her show as the "largest and best Wagon Show now traveling."[66] She realized that she would never be the biggest, and the term "three-ring circus" was taking on a negative context, being synonymous with confusion and chaos. Because of that she began, to advertise the elements of her show that provided an advantage over larger rail show competitors. "ONE RING, ONE ACT, ONE FEATURE" at a time so the audience could see and hear all in the "huge happy days sun and waterproof tents."[67]

Rose Kilian letterhead from 1916.
Private Collection Fred D. Pfening III


ROSE KILIAN
GREAT SOUTHERN
SHOWS
One Ring, One Act, One Feature at a Time
SO YOU CAN SEE AND HEAR EVERYTHING UNDER OUR HUGE HAPPY DAYS SUN AND WATER PROOF TENTS.
THE SECRET OF TRUE HAPPINESS
THE ONLY SUCCESSFUL TREATMENT FOR THE BLUES IS THE LAUGH CURE
OUR CLOWNS
Now Open the Flood Gates of Merriment And Deluge the World with Joyousness
SEE OUR TRAINED DOGS, GOATS & EDUCATED MULE
FREE EXHIBITION
On the Show Grounds at 1 O'CLOCK

Rose Kilian Overland Shows Herald
Used with permission from Illinois State University's Special Collections, Milner Library

Rose Kilian Shows billboard.
Mabel Smiley Collection

Rose had been a long-time patron of Hatch Show Print for her letterpress needs and used their location in downtown Nashville as a permanent address for the show. For many seasons, Hatch produced contracts and lot passes, general admission tickets, heralds, and letterhead for the show. She began adding more specialized requirements to the order: special courtesy passes, concert tickets, side and pit show tickets, women's tickets, pass-out tickets, and school tickets. She even offered free admission to "all old people over 65," if accompanied by five people buying tickets.[68]

Hatch was soon getting bigger orders from Rose, including "six-sheet billboard posters, 750 21x28 inch buckskin banners, and 10,000 4x12 inch 'tonighters.'"[69] Besides pasting billboard posters around town, the show was promoted by a press agent who would also put articles in the local newspaper to let townspeople know the circus was coming.

As the show expanded, it was necessary to increase her advertising and press. Rose added an automobile plus two wagons to the advance and began billing like a railroad circus.[70] The advance moved to each new town ten days ahead of the show.[71]

Over the years there were a number of press agents for the circus including: Howard Wasenbach (1910), Frank Belmont (1919), Harry Deghan (1922), C.C. Whiting (1922), Cliff Smiley (1923), Dr. Charles W. Fisher (1925), Ira Gross (1927), William Kempsmith, Fred Bailey Thompson (1928), and Billy Stiles (1929-30).[72]

With the circus drawing the crowds, Rose found herself needing more performers and began more frequent advertisements for show people in the want ads of *The Billboard*.

When Otto returned from his service in France 15 months after joining the army, he found the reorganized show almost unrecognizable from the mud show that he had left.[73]

When the circus appeared near Cumberland Furnace, Tennessee, a local farmer named Loranzy Miller stopped by to see if they needed hay for their livestock. After talking with Otto, the new show manager, the farmer's daughter began delivering hay to the circus for the next two weeks.

During those two weeks, Otto and Maggie fell in love, were married at her home, and she started traveling with the show. In the years to come Maggie sold tickets, cooked for the show hands, and performed various behind the scenes functions.[74] In 1922, Maggie gave birth to Otto's first child Myrtle in the back of a wagon in Cains Store, Kentucky.[75]

A 1918 photo of twenty-four-year-old Private Otto William Kilian, 333rd Infantry, 84th Division, before his deployment to Le Mans, France.
Mabel Smiley Collection

Family would come and go, and in 1921, daughter Ruth and Eber Sawyer left the show to perform with Montana Belle's Circus and Wild West.[76]

Despite others in the family being away for a time, daughter Mabel stayed with the show performing an aerial routine, acting as treasurer for the show, and working the ticket wagon with her sister-in-law Maggie.[77] Eventually, her husband took a position as music supervisor and instructor for Wayne County schools in Wooster, Ohio.[78] After trouping for twenty-three years with Rose, Mabel left the show with her three-year-old Clifford, and newborn Evelyn.

Injuries

There was a steady need for new acts to bring something novel and sometimes even substitute for performers who were injured. Paul J. Jones was injured doing an acrobatic and heavy lifting act that occurred while doing a sixteen-foot porpoise leap.[79] Lion trainer Chris Howard was injured in Jellico, Tennessee during his fighting lion act.[80] Another injury that made the papers was when Sid Kridello broke his collarbone in 1923 when the line broke to his rigging while he was doing his wire act. It was estimated he would be out of the show five weeks while he recovered at home.[81]

Sometimes it was members of the audience who were injured. In May 1922, the seats fell at Haleyville, Alabama and several people were injured.[82] However, the seats were quickly put up again and the show continued. Unfortunately, this happened again two years later in June of 1924 with five who received injuries; a broken leg, a fractured hip, one badly bruised, a sprained ankle, and an injured leg.[83]

Animals

Besides adding performers and acts, Rose also prepared to add more animals. In 1919, she added light pony cages, and in 1922, she added a steel arena and had wagons built for the new animal acts.[84] In addition to her famous dancing horses, twenty high-grade acting dogs, an educated goat and mule, she acquired three new animal cages in 1923, for a new consignment of animals that had been ordered from a leading animal dealer for early spring delivery. Four months there were five cages of wild animals and Millie Marguerite had turned her untamable lion act into a hypnotic lion act.

In 1925, Rose wrote to John T. Benson, manager of Carl Hagenbeck Collectors, Importers, Dealers of Wild and Domestic Animals and Birds to find out what an elephant would cost. His response letter written four days later states that a young elephant she needs would cost $3,250, but a larger one that was "quiet, and a good worker" would be $4,000.[85] Benson also quoted the cost of a good laughing hyena as being $350, and the very best rhesus monkey costing $12.50 each.

Music

The band was initially increased to ten-pieces, adding Roy Chamber, John Walker, Fred Daller, and Frank P. Melster as band leader in 1920, all from the J.F. Murphy Shows. W.L. Larrison was the musical director in 1922 with William Perry, CC Whiting, Gus Woodey, Jack Wilson, and Claude LaMonte.[86] In 1923 Fred Collins led the 10-piece band, and over time, a pneumatic calliope was added to the pit show and the band soon increased increased to twelve-pieces. Music also changed from the 'march' to 'jazz' with Clate Seeman leading the band in 1923. In 1925, Rose made a call for Hawaiian musicians for the show.[87]

Rose Kilian Shows Band around 1911. In the back row is Ruth Kilian with the trombone and Otto Kilian with the baritone.
Bracy Collection

Acts

At the heart of the show were acrobatics that carried it in the early years with the Kilian family starring in most of the acts. Rose continued expanding her circus, hiring even more non-family acts like Wiley Ferris and Bob Molliston.[88] Will Whitlark was not only an aerialist but also a front bender contortionist whose career spanned more than sixty years. He was with the show from 1919 to 1920.[89] Another contortionist with the show was Annie Knight.

Cowden Slaters was on the perch with the show in 1921. She was joined by Harry DeMarlo & wife (knife throwing) as late arrivals from the Mighty Haag Show. Other troupers on the program in early 1923 were the Matlock-Franklyn Troupe of five acrobats, the Kilian sisters: Mabel & Ruth; Sid Kridello and his wife doing slack and taut wire walking and juggling.

In 1925, the Fisher family of six aerialists and acrobats joined the show, including Ruby, the fourteen-year-old daughter of Charles and Ruth. In 1928 she joined the Mighty Haag Circus with her family and married Harry Haag, Sr.

Wire artists Laura and Arthur Whittler joined Rose in 1927, after an impressive career with Atterbury Brothers, M.L. Clark & Sons, Elmer Jones, and Cooper Bros.[90]

Equestrienne

Chief Keys and his wife Tillie were added to the program in Florida where Chief demonstrated rope spinning, horse roping, and bronc riding.

Joe and Agnes Webb also joined the show. Joe was the chief cowboy doing trick roping and announcing, while Agnes performed trick and fancy riding. Another trouper was Texas Charlie, a bareback rider.

Clown Alley

Clown Alley was made up of whole platoons of clowns, including daughter Ruth who had performed with the Mighty Haag Shows in the early years and again with Haag in 1925 as "Little Soup".[91] Billy Reid and Sid Kridello appeared early in the reorganized show, Fred Daller had a mule hurdle, Bud Echols, Claude and Chris LaMonte clowned in 1922, along with Harry and Ruby Rosse, Billy Clifty, and Ed Simpson in 1923. Long-time trouper Jack Stiles was with the show as well as Fred Simmons as a clown and juggler, along with Hap Nelson and Dave Russel with their football-kicking mule. Besides juggling, the clowns offered performances in stilt dancing, chair balancing, revolving ladder, a goat act, mind reading, magic, and ventriloquism.

By 1930, railroad rates were cheaper than feeding horses, and Rose was offering twenty-five dollars a week for circus acts. At the same time, talkies, like "Swing High," were being popularized about the glory days of the circus at its best before mechanization.[92]

That year the economy suffered from the first major round of bank failures in the Great Depression. It was a difficult time already and the circuses were hit hard. With money more difficult to come by, as well as increasing expenses, "the wagon circus had its day. One of the last of the species died an economic death in Southern Kentucky."[93]

The people of Stanford, Kentucky who had money for the price of a ticket, largely choose to keep it and the Rose Kilian Show played its last performance to "only fairly well patronized" audience in September.[94]

Shortly after the final show, daughter Ruth was hospitalized with encephalitis. She died nine days later at age thrity-five and was buried in Willow Springs, Missouri on October 2.[95] Her obituary mentioned that she had been a bareback rider and tight wire walker for several years with various circuses and that she was the daughter of Rose Kilian, a well-known figure in the circus world, having started the Rose Kilian Shows many years before.[96]

At the age of sixty, Rose decided that after twenty-three consecutive seasons, it was time to close her circus. Ernest Haag, a longtime friend and owner of the Mighty Haag Shows, bought the Rose Kilian Show and he and his wife, Alice, allowed Rose to continue to troupe with them, looking after the girls' wardrobe.[97]

Years later, as she was being treated for chronic illness at her daughter Mabel's home in Wooster, Ohio, Rose wrote a letter to her son Otto and his children in Tennessee. In her final letter, she wanted her family to know that even though she was far away, she had not forgotten them.

She asked Otto to be good to the children and the rest of the family. She also reminded him not to forget to pray and remember the 23rd Psalm. She signed the letter, from your "Loving mother, Rosina Christina Kilian."

Rose Kilian passed away eight days later, on November 26, 1936. She was sixty-six.[98] Rose Kilian was buried at the Grandview Union Cemetery in next to Mabel's husband, John C. Smiley, who had died earlier that year. Despite the fact that she was the first woman to start a circus, her death certificate listed her occupation as "housewife." Her headstone was engraved "Mother."[99]

Rose Kilian left a legacy of entertaining the small town, the remote, the left out. During 23 years of continual operation, her circus traveled through sixteen states, primarily in the Southeast, with an average of five states per year. After her season opened in the South, it generally traveled North before turning Southward again in varying loop patterns for the second half.

In total, Rose Kilian's circus visited over 3,000 individual towns, averaging 288 stops per year, with some of those, such as Charlotte, Tennessee, visited again and again. During those twenty-three years she offered two performances daily except on Sundays. As a result, her circus delivered more than double the number of performances of shows that returned to winter quarters at the end of each season.

To those along the route she was known as good old Aunt Rose, and for many of them she was remembered for her pretty little mule ponies. While she had the greatest following among the circus-loving public, she was loved by everyone, wherever she spread her Tented Fairyland.[100]

Rose Kilian pictured with her grandchildren in 1923. Standing is Johnnie Justus Sawyer, seated are Clifford Smiley and Myrtle Kilian, with Rose Kilian holding baby Evelyn Smiley.

Bracy Collection

About the Authors:

Patrick Bracy is the Great, Great, Grandson of Rose Kilian. Growing up, he was told stories about how his family once owned a circus. Unfortunately, the only proof he was ever shown was a 22-caliber pistol that was said to be used by the lion trainer and a pocket watch that belonged to his great grandfather, Otto. Not exactly irrefutable proof of a circus heritage in the family. It was not until 1999, when Patrick and his wife, Heather, visited the Robert L. Parkinson Library and Research Center at Circus World Museum in Baraboo that they learned Rose Kilian did indeed own a circus and there was much more to be discovered. This article represents some of their 24 years of research and fulfills their goal to have Rose Kilian remembered as one of the circus greats.

Patrick and Heather Bracy

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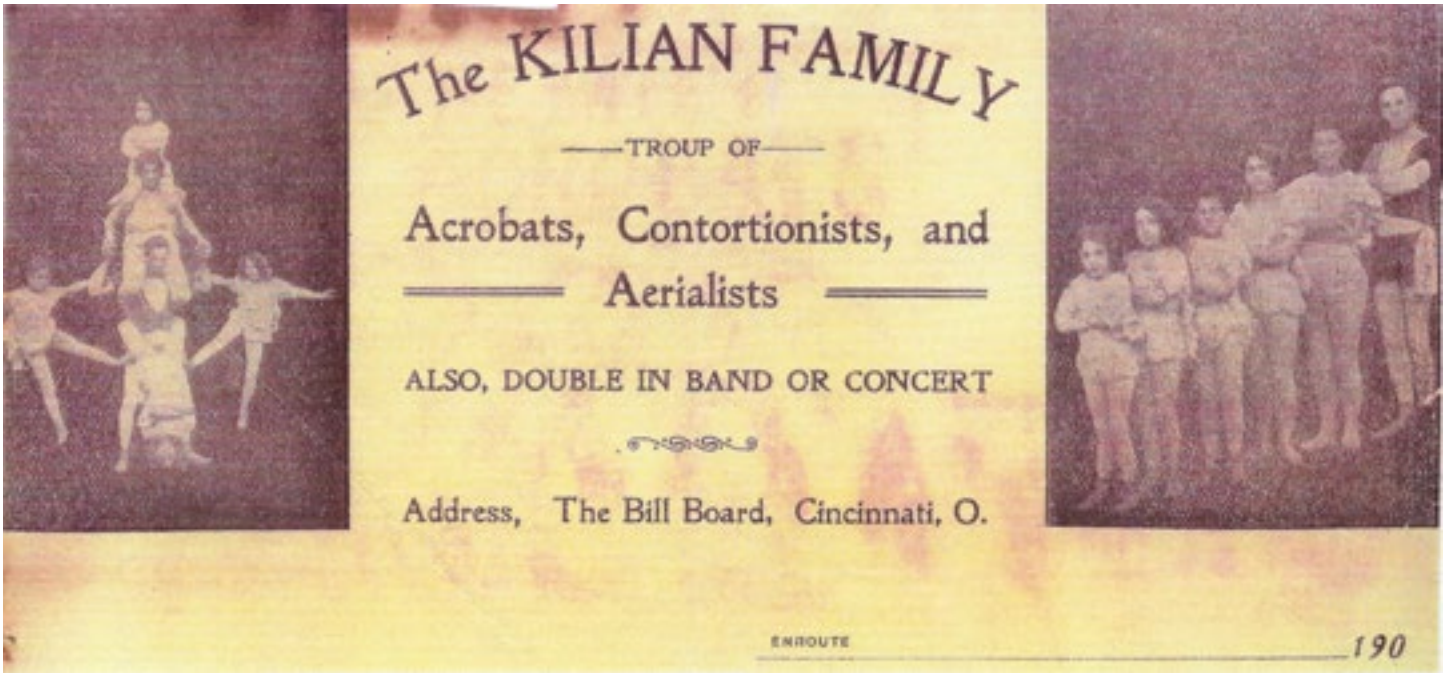

The Kilian Family Troup circa 1900. Rose's husband, John Justus Kilian is pictured with Rose, Rosina, Mabel, Otto & Ruth Bracy Collection

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CIRCUS MAQUETTES

The Collection of Lavern Meyer

BY CHRIS BERRY

Unknown - Birds and Living statues

This striking artwork was created as a 24-sheet billboard that was twenty-feet long and nine-feet high. While there is no circus title on the maquette, it could have been added during the printing process, or the image could have been printed as a stock poster to be pasted on the side of a barn or wall.

RINGLING BROS AND BARNUM & BAILEY COMBINED CIRCUS
The Great OTARI TROUPE in STARTLING MID-AIR FLIGHTS from a HUGE AERIAL CROSS

Ringling Barnum - "The Great Otari Troupe"

The Otari trapeze act was featured with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey from 1934 until 1936. The troupe performed on a variety of flying trapeze and stationary bars that were rigged onto an illuminated cross.

Al G. Barnes - Aladdin

The spectacle "Aladdin and the Parade of Gold" first appeared on the Al G. Barnes Circus in 1927 and continued on the program through the 1929 season. Note how a proofreader corrected the spelling from "Alladin" (sic) during the approval process. This particular poster was printed as a half-sheet, a one-sheet and a very large 16-sheet. This artwork was used in 1929.

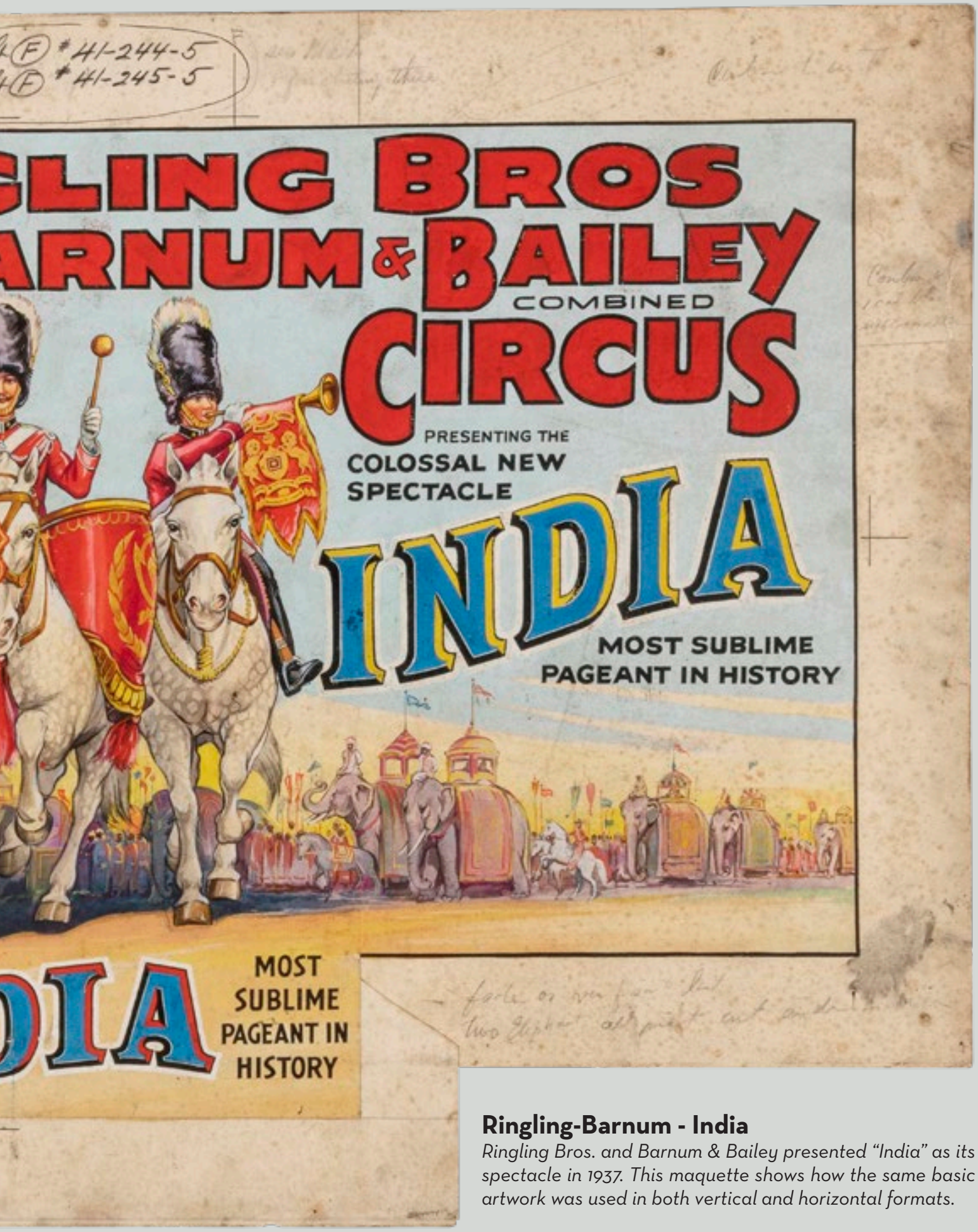
On September 28, 1959, the United States Printing Company of Erie, Pennsylvania was acquired by Diamond National Corporation, a large timber company whose factories produced lumber, pulp and paper.[1] From about 1890 until 1960, the firm, once known as Erie Lithographing & Printing, had been a major producer of advertising and posters for circuses and theatrical companies, as well as consumer products such as Coca-Cola and Snickers bars.[2]

Although circus posters no longer rolled off its presses, a longtime Erie artist and inventor named Edward "Lavern" Meyer had the foresight to rescue dozens of pieces of original artwork—maquettes—some of which he may have helped create during his 30 years at the firm.[3]

Meyer died not long after Diamond National purchased the printing company, and much of what we know today about the artist is found in a faded newspaper obituary from 1960, along with family stories that were passed down to his great-nephew, Eric Schneider.[4]

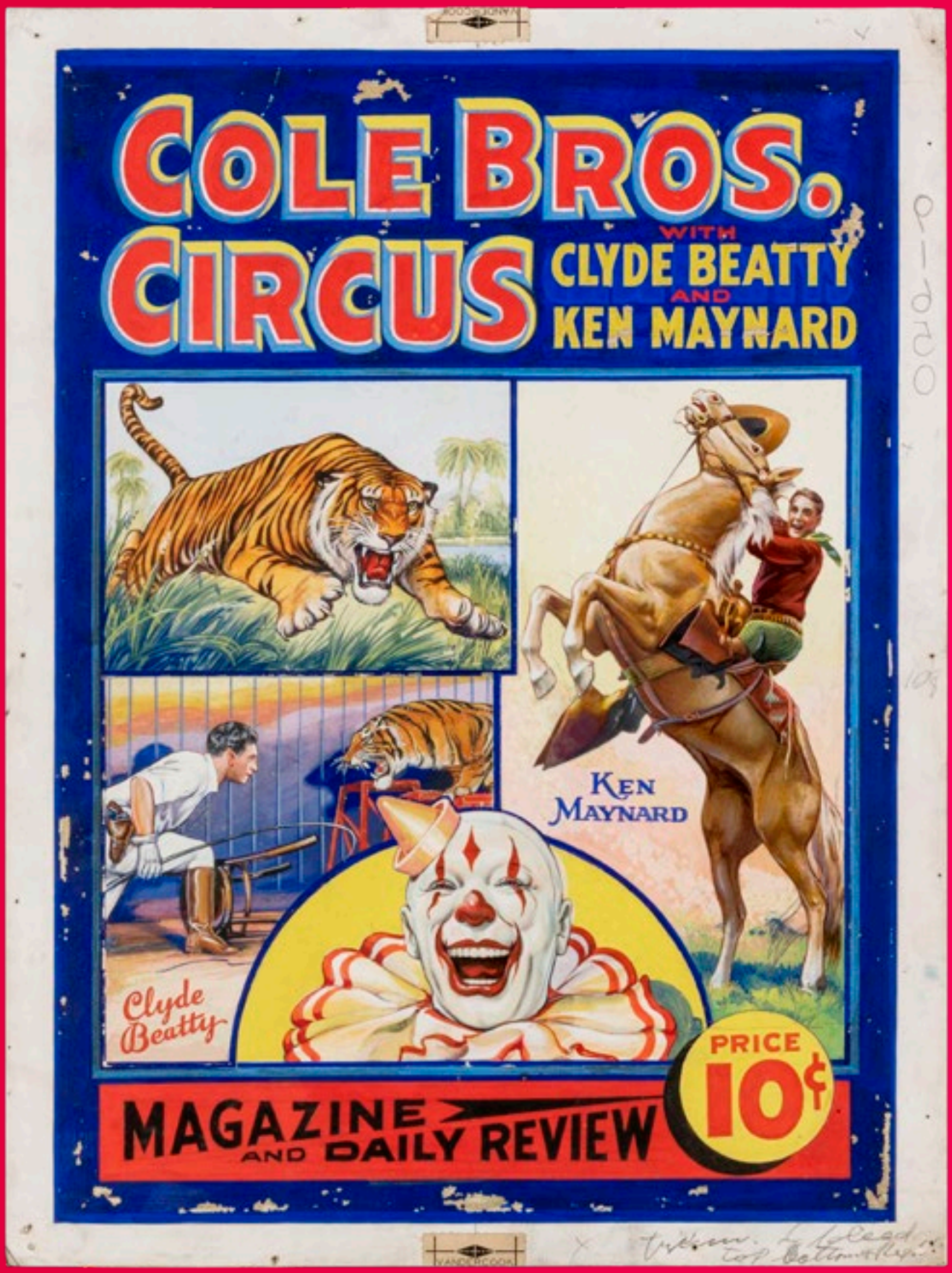
"He was big into doing lettering, not just on circus posters, but also other artwork that crossed the desk of the Erie Lithograph company, including animals." Although he was primarily a graphic artist,[5] Meyer also kept private notebooks filled with drawings of elephants, tigers and horses. Schneider said that when the Erie company was sold in 1959, his great-uncle saved more than 80 pieces of original poster artwork, a collection that eventually made its way from Pennsylvania to Florida."[6]

Schneider consigned much of the collection to Potter & Potter Auctions of Chicago where it where it was sold on July 29, 2023, along with examples of some of the actual lithographs that were printed from the artwork. Auctioneer Gabe Fajuri says the collection is unique, because by very definition the maquettes themselves are unique. "They are the paintings used to create circus posters, some of which may not have been printed or did not survive." While poster art has been sold in the past, Fajuri said that a grouping of this size has never been offered. "We are in uncharted territory because these are all one-of-one. and that opportunity does not come along very often and that makes it exciting."[7]



Ringling-Barnum - India

Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey presented "India" as its spectacle in 1937. This maquette shows how the same basic artwork was used in both vertical and horizontal formats.



Cole Bros. Program Cover

In addition to posters, the Erie Lithographing and Printing Company also produced artwork for programs, couriers and heralds. This design was used on the cover of the Cole Bros. program in 1937.

Beatty Russell

This classic image was one of many new poster designs that Erie created for Jess Adkins and Zack Terrell's Cole Bros. Circus in 1935. When Clyde Beatty left Cole Bros. in 1938, he claimed the artwork, and as Beatty moved to different shows over the next decade the poster was reworked several times with various titles. This version was a mockup that used the title Clyde Beatty-Russell Bros. Circus, the name of his circus in 1944.

Christy Bros. Streamer

This unusual 20-sheet streamer was created for the Christy Bros. Circus about 1925. Several of the scenes depicted here were also used in smaller one-sheet posters that would have been placed in store windows.

Barnes Trains Unloading

The arrival of a big railroad show was a free attraction on circus day, and posters of the trains unloading reinforced the size of the operation. This artwork was originally created for the Ringling-owned Al G. Barnes Circus of 1936. When the title Sells-Floto was added to the circus for the 1937 and 1938 seasons, the poster was reworked to reflect the new title.

Ringling-Barnum Qualterios

Although there was never an actual act on Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey billed as "The Great Qualterios," in 1935 and 1936 there was an aerial ballet number that featured performers on swinging ladders. The aerial ballet likely included some of those who also worked with Qualterio Walkmir, a performer whose perch act was featured at the same time.

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PRESENTS

Endnotes

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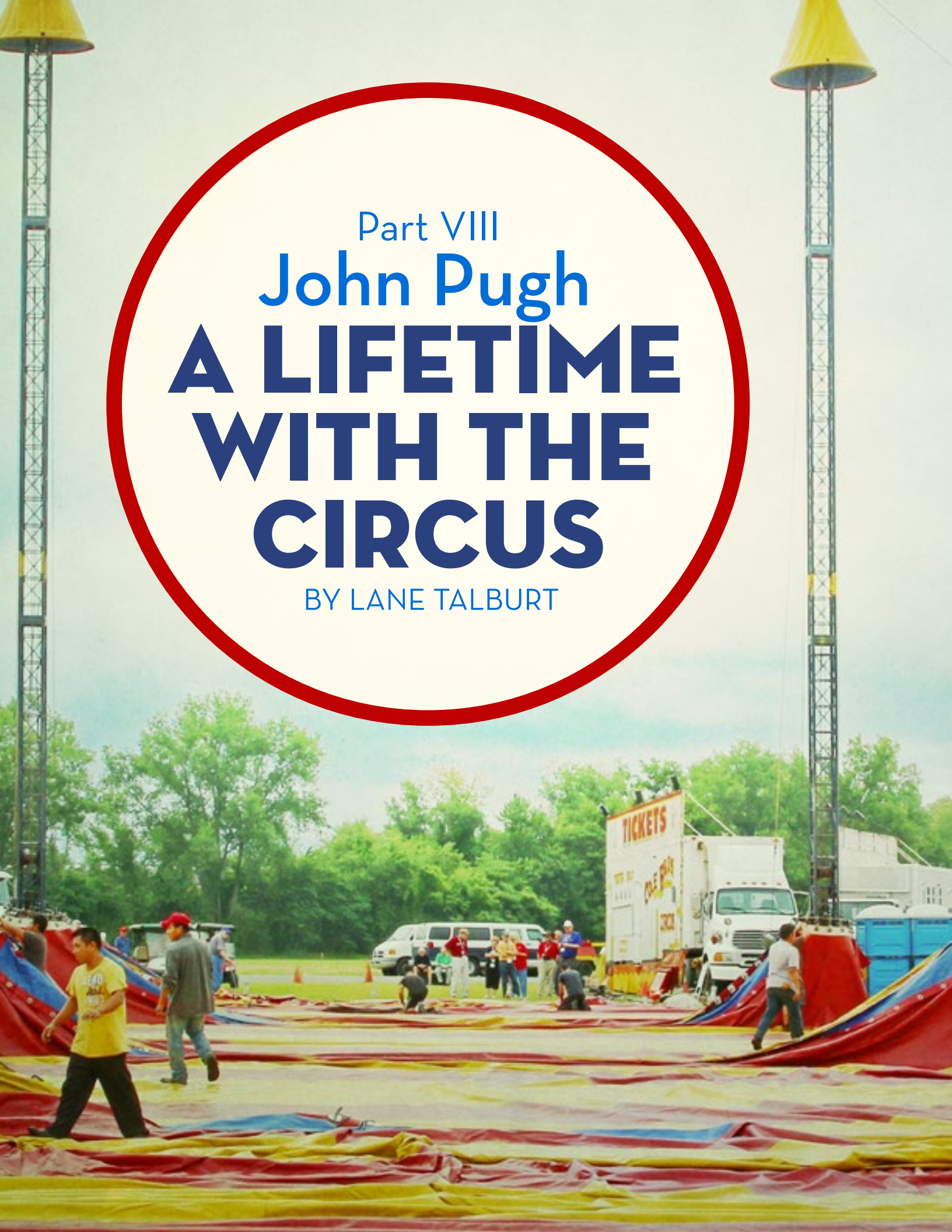
Russell Bros. Sea Lion

When Walter Jennier and his trained sea lion Buddy were hired to appear on Russell Bros. Circus in the late 1930s, show owners Claude and Pauline Webb commissioned the Erie Litho. Company to create special posters for the "educated sea lion." Buddy was billed as a "musical virtuoso," who could walk a tight wire and balance on one fin. The sea lion was also promoted as being "more human than a human."



Part VIII

John Pugh

A LIFETIME WITH THE CIRCUS

BY LANE TALBURT

The Cole Bros. big top begins to take shape in Springfield, Massachusetts July 15, 2015. Johnny Pugh brought his show to the World Circus Summit that summer, and only a few weeks later the circus closed forever.
James Cole photograph

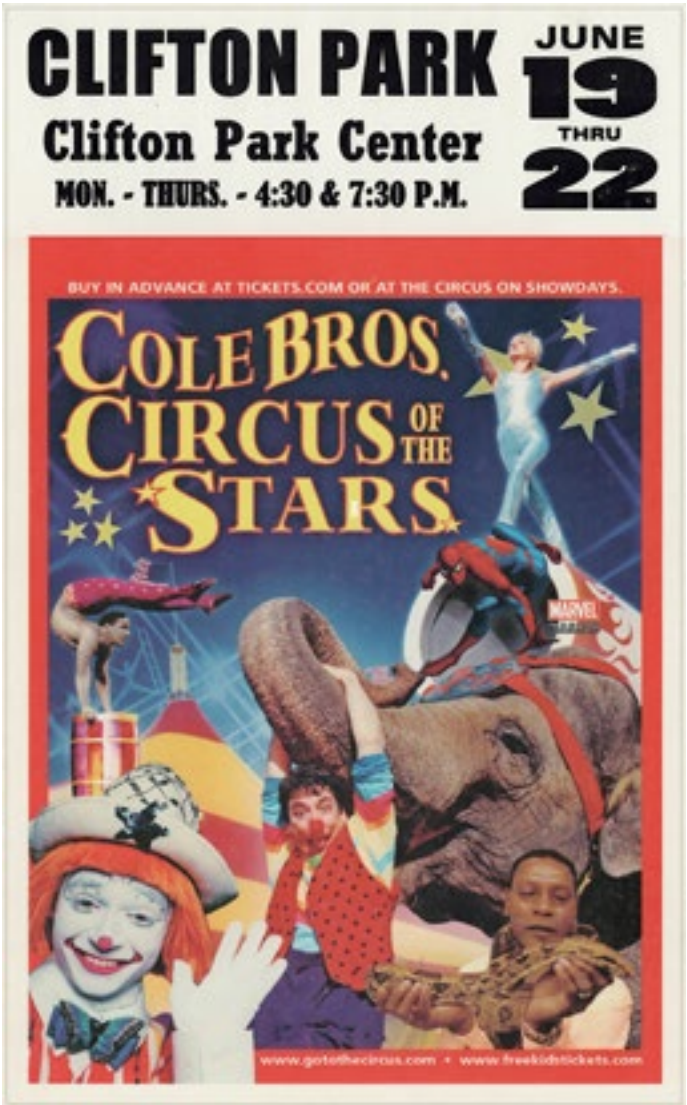
Scrubbing the name of venerated wild-animal trainer Clyde Beatty from the marquee was the least of owner John W. Pugh's worries in launching the "NEW Cole Bros. Circus" in the spring of 2004. Some observers may have surmised that eliminating the show's namesake was a publicity gimmick, a rebranding of the long familiar—perhaps too familiar—Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. title. They would have been wrong.

It was purely and simply a business decision. "I didn't want to pay Clyde Beatty, Jr. a small fortune for the use of his father's name," Pugh revealed in a 2014 video interview with the author. The trainer's son had struck a deal with Pugh for the continued use of the Beatty name following the death of Clyde Jr.'s mother, Jane Beatty Kuperstock, in 2000. "I went down to West Palm Beach and made a deal with him for the first year," Pugh recalled. "Then Clyde Jr. said it was worth more the second year. He jumped it twenty-five percent on me. And I said, 'No.' "I went back and forth with my marketing people. I asked, 'Do you want to afford this?'"[1] Pugh rejected the Beatty heir's proposed licensing fee increase, abandoning a well-known title that had attracted millions of circus fans since its first use in 1959.

But Pugh had bigger issues to confront, among them a concerted effort by animal rights groups to ban performing elephants on "the world's largest circus under the big top." Faced with a growing litany of unfavorable federal court decisions, inspectors' demands, and acceding to the strong recommendation of his marketing gurus, Pugh reluctantly furloughed the show-owned elephants, Tina and Jewel, from the 2004 and 2005 Cole Bros. tours. The pair was taken on the road by Adam Hill and Bonnie Bale for spot dates on other circuses as well as fairs. "We did two years without the animals; it was terrible for business," Pugh said. [2]

The absence of both elephant *and* tiger routines was the result of a mid-season backyard miscue. As Josip Marcan's tigers were being transferred from their cages to those leading into the big top, one took advantage of a temporary gap—created when the last cage was being pulled into line with the others leading into the steel arena just inside the tent—and went on the lam prior to the matinee. Jumping into his golf cart, Pugh joined local police officers in the mad scramble, carrying a "sleeper gun," a tranquilizer which fortunately proved unnecessary. During Apollo's meandering, the owner said, "I had a heart attack—I'm joking!" Pugh recalled that the tiger "walked through a bunch of barbeques" who scrambled at the unusual sight of an oversized striped cat. "She was confused," Pugh recalled. "She didn't know where she was going."[3] It wasn't part of the act," noted a New York reporter who covered the escapade, "but it sure was thrilling."

> A 450-pound tiger escaped from the Cole Bros. Circus in Forest Park in Woodhaven yesterday (July 31), roaming the park and causing a five-car accident on a highway before being captured after his wild walkabout. Apollo, a 7-year-old white Bengal tiger, was loose for about 20 minutes, did not attack anyone and gave up peacefully… After police isolated Apollo with portable fencing, eyewitnesses


CLIFTON PARK
JUNE 19 THRU 22
Clifton Park Center
MON. - THURS. - 4:30 & 7:30 P.M.
BUY IN ADVANCE AT TICKETS.COM OR AT THE CIRCUS ON SHOWDAYS.
COLE BROS. CIRCUS OF THE STARS
MARVEL
www.gotothecircus.com • www.freekidstickets.com

Johnny Pugh dropped the Clyde Beatty name from his circus in 2004, and at the time this poster was used in 2006 the show was billed as "Cole Bros. Circus of the Stars."

Tegge Circus Archives

said, the cat's trainer used a chunk of meat on a stick to lure him back into his cage. The frisky feline was taken back to the circus.[4]

The escape occurred about an hour before ringmaster Chris Connors was about to whistle "doors" for the first of two Sunday afternoon performances. After completing his pre-show check of the tent interior, Conner said he stepped through the performers entrance next to the big cat arena into the backyard, where he was greeted by clown Perilito Bermudez shouting, "Sir, a tiger has escaped." During the episode Connors said he received an urgent phone call from VP-administration Renee Storey, ordering both performances to be cancelled and ticket purchases refunded. Veteran marketing director Chuck Warner had used his intimate knowledge of the New York media to spur large turnouts for the Queens stand, the ringmaster said. But Pugh intervened and ruled that both shows would proceed. As early spectators watched, Connors had the steel cage torn down and substituted an aerial routine for the opening act.

Offsetting a police-issued citation for creating an "animal nuisance" due to the tiger's escapade and a lawsuit (later settled) by the driver of one of five cars involved in the highway pile-up, the tiger's escape triggered a flurry of local and national media coverage, especially among late-night hosts on television networks. Next-day interviews with tiger trainer Cheryl Haddad spurred ticket sales for the upcoming lucrative Long Island stands, Connors said.[5]

Even with the lack of the cage act for two Queens shows and the season-long absence of pachyderms, the Cole Bros. performance roster remained strong, including domestic animal acts such as the Tsoraev canines and cats, and the Kim family juggling on horseback. The featured Brazilian family of acrobats, the Romerios, presented both aerial and ground routines. A kid's favorite, according to a circus media handout, was "special guest star, Supercat, the high-diving feline seen in the hit movie *The Big Fish*."[6]

Quizzed about his favorite part of the show, owner Pugh quickly responded: "Concessions at the intermission." That was when circus patrons were encouraged to flock to the concession wagon for hot dogs and sodas, and to purchase inflatable toys and plastic lighted swords, among other highly profitable items from the midway stand and roving vendors.[7]

> [Concession toys] used to be all plush at one time. It was like the carnivals. But vinyl doesn't take up much space when it's deflated. You just buy boxes of it, and you've just got to blow it up. The lights are a big item, but they're also a very fragile item. I always used to tell the candy butchers, 'For god's sake, don't sell that thing until they leave the lot, because if a kid gets it, they'll want to fight with a glass sword, and the light doesn't come on, and then you've got to replace the sword.'[8]

In late 2005, circus-goers were once again allowed to purchase elephant rides on Tina and Jewel—but not see the mammals perform, according to a media scribe during the show's November 7-8 stand in Titusville, Florida.

> Tina's an intuitive animal, but there's little chance she knows the controversy that can circle when she takes a child for a ride… They weren't part of recent Cole Bros. shows in Melbourne but will be used for rides…while in town, said John Pugh, circus owner. That's bad news to animal activist organizations such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animal. PETA…called for Cole Bros. to retire Tina and Jewel to an animal sanctuary…This year, [Pugh] said, Tina and Jewel have traveled with another show, doing exhibitions.[9]

Although his circus was frequently targeted by activists, Johnny Pugh always had a variety of animal acts on the program.
James Cole photograph

Animal rights groups continued to pressure Cole Bros. with on-site protests and lobbying efforts at the local level, as well as federal lawsuits. Their appeals to force the traditional under-canvas circus to drop elephant acts brought devastating results. "With elephants, you always had problems," Pugh noted years later, emphasizing that "the elephant environment was part of the show."[10]

Though the remaining two circus-owned elephants returned in 2006, major developments affecting their future were already in the wind. The following year saw George Hanneford presenting his family's elephants on Cole Bros. "This has to be the best routine I have seen in years," observed veteran circus daredevil "Crash" Moreau in his performance review. The act, he said, was "fast paced and doing things others has forgot about. These three ladies know their stuff."[11] While Crash touted the three acrobatic turns by Brazil's Andrey Mederios, the introduction of Elvin Bale's globe that split into two parts, the Bejing Bungee Drivers and the Ponce Family Flyers from Guatamala, Cole marketing director C. M. "Chris" Christ also pointed out that "the crowd favorite year after year is elephants."[12]

Jason Caudill Walker presented tigers in 2010, continuing a long tradition that began with Clyde Beatty.
James Cole photograph

Losing animal license, circus contracts acts

The end of an era came with the revelation that "Cole Brothers Circus, Inc., held Animal Welfare Act License 58-C-0080 from January 27, 1977, to February 15, 2008, when it elected not to renew its Class C Exhibitor's License."[13] From that point on, the circus contracted all animal acts through other trainers and circuses.

Controversy surrounding the two elephants was largely resolved in February 2011 when, according to a Justice Department news release, "John Pugh, Wilbur Davenport and Cole Brothers, Inc., entered plea agreements in U.S. District Court in Beaumont, Texas to resolve Endangered Species Act (ESA) violations related to the purchase and sale of two Asian elephants named 'Tina' and 'Jewel.'" Davenport, a circus employee, had approached Pugh in 2005 to acquire the elephants. "None of the parties possessed…any permit that would have authorized such a sale," the release stated. According to the terms of a five-year, lease-to-purchase agreement, Davenport was to pay Pugh and the circus $150,000.

> Davenport performed with the circus through the summer and fall of 2006 to pay off the balance owed for Tina and Jewel, and thereafter transported the elephants to his home in Leggett, Texas. Davenport intended to incorporate the two elephants into his own business, which included…offering the elephants for personal demonstrations, private parties and events, and elephant rides.
>
> In accordance with terms of the plea agreement, Mr. Pugh and Mr. Davenport were sentenced to three years of probation…Mr. Pugh. was also sentenced to pay a $4,000 fine as well as make a $1,200 community service payment to an organization or organizations working for the conservation or rehabilitation of Asian elephants. Mr. Davenport was sentenced to pay a $5,200 fine…Cole Brothers Circus was sentenced to four years of probation and a $150,000 fine
>
> In August 2009, the [USDA] confiscated Jewel from Mr. Davenport. [He] then abandoned Tina to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, allowing USDA to transport the two elephants together to the San Diego Zoo.
>
> In 2012, the USDA assessed a civil penalty of $15,000 against Pugh and Cole Bros. as part of a cease-and-desist order. The consent decree settlement also named including Gigi Davenport, doing business as Gigi's Exotics.[14]

Following the surrender of his Class C animal license in 2008, Pugh voiced frustration over the future of elephants in his or other show. "I figure sooner or later, there won't be any elephants around. And I said to myself, 'As long as there are elephants out there, I'll use them.' It's just one of those things and, unfortunately, business is business.[15] Pugh persisted in presenting elephants to circus audiences in the face of continued protests and, increasingly, the denial by local governments to permit Cole Bros. from setting up its mobile enterprise in their communities.

Pugh stopped exhibiting his own elephants following lawsuits and pressure from activists. In 2007 George Hanneford presented his elephants on Cole Bros.
Paul Gutheil photograph

In the meantime, Cole Bros. faced weather-related challenges endemic to tented circuses. In 2006, the big top averted a blowdown at Greenport, Long Island, on July 28. On August 28, a previously booked, mud-soaked lot forced the circus to stage rare indoor performances for the LuLu Shriners at the Pennsylvania National Guard in North Philadelphia. In 2007, a tornado ripped through DeLand, Florida, leveling the Pugh's home. The circus couple moved to their apartment in Stuart while a new residence was built at a different DeLand location.

Laura Herriott-Ortiz presented a mixed animal act in 2011.
James Cole photograph

Circus peers honor Johnny

Under sunny skies in Sarasota on January 17, 2010, Pugh was inducted into the Circus Ring of Fame, joining the ranks of circus greats such as P.T. Barnum, John Ringling North and Clyde Beatty. The organization's president, Floyd Kruger, described Pugh as "a highly regarded and formidable force in the industry…And he has been fairly firm about having animals on his show—and people in the circus industry have backed him on that…He presents a high-quality form of entertainment." Pugh told a reporter that he had no successor in mind. Making a veiled reference to his on-going efforts to retain elephants on the show, Pugh said, "You're looking at the most endangered species."[16]

Midway into the 2010 tour, Cole Bros. played to four packed houses in Meriden, Connecticut, on June 30 and July 1. As a replacement for a flood-damaged lot Warwick, Rhode Island, the tented city's spread on a city-owned spacious, grassy lot was negotiated by Cole Bros. senior booking agent Tim Orris with the Meriden mayor and his assistant, a devout circus aficionado. The circus paid a hefty $10,000 for the privilege, of which $4,000 was charged for the use of the lot—a former site of a demolished retail operation on the edge of downtown Meriden—and another $6,000 that the city government tacked on to cover the overtime costs of police and fire personnel. "It's very difficult to find good locations," Pugh told a local newsman after a cordial meeting with the mayor, who was also

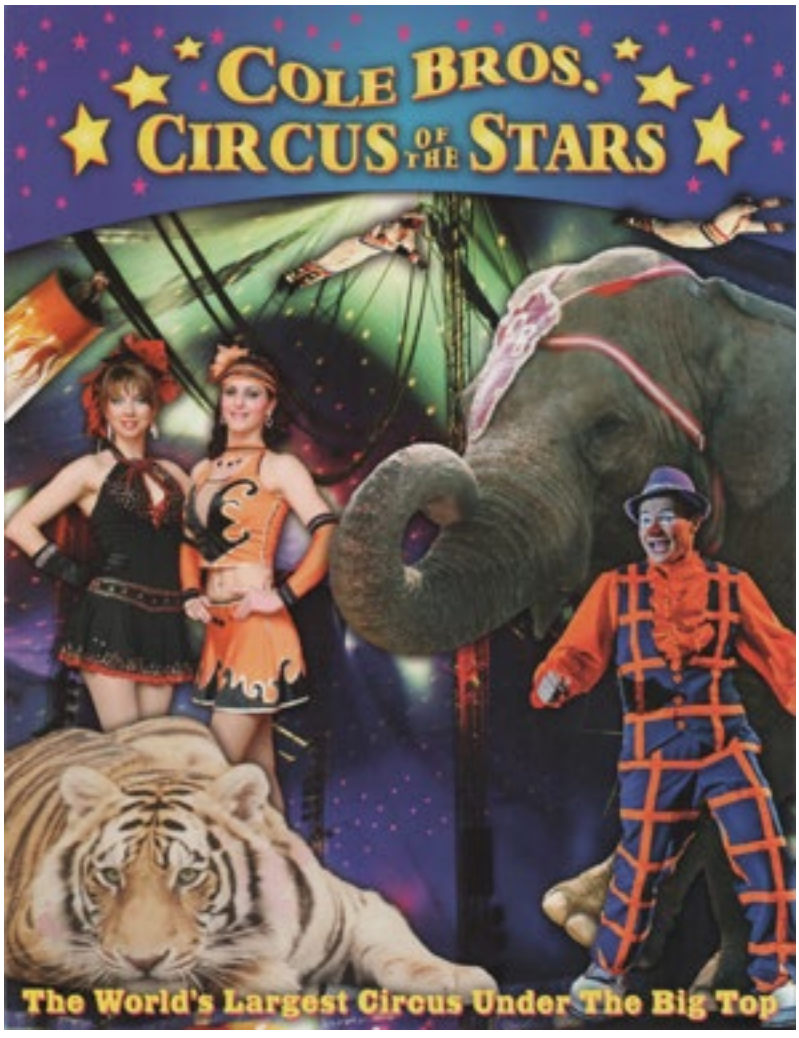
the honorary ringmaster on show day. "We're hoping it's going to work out well for them and for us. We're in the circus business, but the real estate business is sometimes more important to us. You have to find a good place to put the circus; you don't want to put a thing like this on a parking lot."[17]

When Cole Bros. returned to Meriden in 2011, hoping to repeat good business, the rental fee was upped to $12,000. And that was the show's last stand in that New England community. During a May 11, 2011 interview with the author under the circus marquee in Meriden, Pugh confided that, "I dropped personally about a million dollars into this thing this year. Basically, I'm playing with everything I own when I'm out with the circus. Because I'm committed to the circus 100 percent."

> It's something when I walk on the lot and I look at this thing, I say to myself, I say, "You know, maybe I'm not going to quit show business." Like my wife [Brigitte, a retired performer] says, "Now you've got a new tent, I'm guessing you're going to decide to stay out there another 10 years." I said, "No, I don't want 10 years, but I'd like to at least give it a couple more seasons." I enjoy it out there; it's fun. I love being on the road.
>
> Winter quarters, it's a drag really, because it's nothing but decisions, decisions every day. I go over to winter quarters every morning, and I'm down in the office with Renee [Storey] and company, and we're going over the routing or the advertising. I grab something to eat for lunch and get back to the office. I mean, if I'm possibly lucky, I get home about six or seven. So, it's a tough grind.
>
> When I was a manager and went home, I used to be able to sleep. Now I'm awake and wondering where that next dime is coming from.[18]

Admittedly an "operations person," but "never an office person," Pugh said he had a change of mind when the road office staff quit prior to the season opener in the late 2000s, leaving the show without a treasurer to take care of daily business. He turned to an unexpected source for help. Until he was approached by a ticket seller who volunteered to fill in, he considered Tatyana Senovyat as an ex-member of the show's premiere Russian Air Force casting act – "one of the best flyers I ever saw."

> Then Elvin Bale taught her to be the human cannonball. And she ended up doing 68 shots under the big top. But let me tell you, she's probably one of the best bookkeepers we've ever had. She wants to know where every nickel goes. And I suddenly realized that maybe a few years back the money was a little looser than I thought it was. Well, in the last three or four years, I've become an office person. I go into the office wagon every morning, run the books, run the cash, go to the bank, make the deposits. I don't sign every check.[19]



Tegge Circus Archives

Inspector halts opening day's shows

The owner reassessed the importance of the Connecticut market—and its profitable New England dates—after encountering stiff resistance from a local building inspector as the show was being set up for a three-day stay at a Milford shopping mall. Citing his interpretation of the state's building code, the city inspector declined to issue Cole Bros. a permit, forcing the circus to cancel its opening day performances on June 13.

According to a report in an area newspaper, marketing director Dan Baltonis said the circus "has met as many requirements as it can…He said the circus believes it has complied with requirement for a temporary structure, but the city is applying codes for permanent structures. Bringing the circus to town is a huge undertaking, and the permit process has gone on for months…'It's a huge loss,' Baltonis said. 'They're giving us a lot of hoops to run through.'"[20]

> The owner, who estimated his outfit lost over $30,000 in revenue for the delay, said he anticipated the primary source of the dispute: the lack of railings on steps separating seating sections. On the weekend prior to the mall tent raising he had authorized the spending of approximately $20,000 for a welder to fabricate sets of metal railing to be installed on stairways between bleachers inside the huge tent. They were in place when the inspector made his final rounds, allowing Cole Bros. to proceed on the remaining two days of the engagement.[21]

At Mansfield, Massachusetts, and Oyster Bay, Long Island, animal rights protesters were unsuccessful convincing city councils to refuse issuing permits for the circus. The Mansfield council ruled unanimously that "voters, not selectmen, should address the debate on animal cruelty in circuses."[22]

Cole Bros. lost two performances to Hurricane Irene at Salisbury, Maryland, on August 29, 2011.

The circus experienced improved returns during stands such as the Azalea Festival in Wilmington, North Carolina on April 11-14, where Pugh said his show was riding the financial success of the previous session, despite a recession. "My guess is, people aren't taking the big trip, but they still want to see some entertainment." Comparing his responsibilities as the circus owner to those of a city mayor, Pugh told an interviewer that he "listens to everyone's problems, judges where to go and which acts to book and oversees a staff of 140 employees, about 110 who travel with the show. They include performers and animal trainers, who work with their own animals."[23]

Changing times

In 2011 a group of elephants owned by Carson & Barnes were presented by "John John" Walker. Tim Frisco, elephant superintendent at the Hugo, Oklahoma-based tented rival, brought along five elephants for the 2012 tour, which Pugh termed profitable as well.

Pugh said he was "privileged" to have Judit and Juergen Nerger on the program. They began presenting a group of tigers in 2011.
James Cole photograph

Referring to a new show-opening big cat routine featuring Juergen and Judit Nerger with Bengal white tigers from John Cuneo's Hawthorn Corporation, Pugh said, "We're very privileged to have the act. I don't know what to do to replace it, or to have a new act at some point. The one sad thing about this show is that you have very good people working for you, and sometimes you have to make changes. And it's hard. Because both Elvin and I were performers at one time, we know how it is for a performer to have a job. This is a long season, and there's not too many shows, other than Ringling, that can give them thirty-six, thirty-seven weeks."

To keep the performance looking fresh from year-to-year also required changes in the roster, the owner added. "We take a lot of thought in doing that. The first season we had the globe, we fired the cannon over the globe [as the closing act.] That worked good. We'd done it for a couple of years, and I said to Elvin, 'We've got to figure some way to get that globe in the first half,' so that you have two acts that you've had here for a long time, it looks different. You evolve your performance each tour so that people come in and say, 'Wow! Great! I love the show this year.'"[24]

Pugh admitted during a July 4 weekend engagement at the upscale Trumbull Mall near Bridgeport, Connecticut that the season's business "was down." He blamed lackluster turnouts at key stands in DeLand; Charleston, South Carolina; and Winchester and Manassas, Virginia. He pointed specifically to the Simon Corporation not allowing Cole Bros. to bring animals onto its mall during the normally lucrative apple festival at Winchester as a turning point.

He said the organized animal rights movement had threatened to picket all Simon nationwide mall locations, successfully persuading the corporation to ban all circus animals from their properties. As a result, said Pugh, business at the Shenandoah Apple Blossom Festival date "was way off; it was off by fifty percent." To salvage the stand, "I wanted the [festival] committee to play the fairgrounds. I tried to get them to select some other place, maybe the airport…anywhere," the owner recalled. In the end the Simon contract prevailed. "But," he emphasized, "people wanted to see the animals. We had the animals camped out at the fairgrounds, which was just up the road. On Saturday, a caravan of almost 500 cars drove by just to look at the animals. Doesn't that tell you something? And Manassas was a last-minute replacement for a booking at Prince William, site of another Simon mall. "They didn't want us to bring our animals in there—and they had some construction as well."[25]

2014 tour ends early

Overall, Cole Bros. finances and routing produced no better results in 2014 and 2015, ultimately leading to the show's downfall. The 2014 route was largely a repeat of previous years. From the opener in DeLand (March 15-16), the circus moved up the East Coast through the Carolinas, Virginia, Maryland, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, New York and Connecticut; then com-

Dale Thomsen was one of several human cannonballs who thrilled audiences of Johnny Pugh's Cole Bros. Circus.
James Cole photograph

pleting the season with stands in Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida before closing with a November 13-16 stand in the Sunshine State's Port St. Lucie.

But the tour differed from previous swings, for one important reason: at the tail end, the circus abandoned bookings in six communities, effective with a Gainesville date (November 17-18). The news media reaction was swift—and telling. For example: "The Cole Bros. Circus of the Stars event scheduled for the Sun 'n Fun campus (in Lakeland, November 19-20) has been cancelled…The circus has also cancelled shows in Naples, Cape Coral and Bonita Springs. The sudden decision was reportedly due to financial issues."[26]

It was not a lack of talent throughout the whole organization that caused the premature shutdown. Officers and department heads were highly experienced in the circus business. Pugh and Bale were more than likely the best one-two operational management team on the road, compared to other touring circuses.

The performance talent was top-flight, beginning with Vincinta Page's tiger routine and ending with "Commander" Dale Thomsen's overpowering cannon shoot across the arena. Chris Connors was in his 12th season as ringmaster-performance director. Tim Orris continued as the chief booking agent, and ten marketing directors fronted the advance for key dates, and "Goodwill Ambassador Lew-E the Clown" (Lee Andrews) attracted media interviews—plus boosting ticket sales at shopping malls—several days before the show's arrival.

Animal rights organizations promoted web sites to draw attention to Cole Bros. animal care and to encourage media coverage of placard-bearing protesters on show days. With increasing effectiveness, local residents bombarded their own governing bodies to ban the circus from coming to town. With the important assistance of sponsors, Cole Bros. was able to evade—at least temporarily in some instances—shutout attempts. The *Boston Globe* illustrated the impact of attack and counterattack on one Massachusetts historic community.

> Cole Bros. Circus will come to Plymouth for one more visit before a bylaw is expected to take effect and bans circus from performing in America's Hometown. "Yes, it will be coming," said Kathy Carmell-Sirrico, past president of the Kiwanis Club of Plymouth, which has sponsored the circus performances at the Plymouth Municipal Airport each year. "This will be the last one."
>
> In April, Plymouth Town Meeting approved a bylaw prohibiting the exhibition of wild animals in the town. Once it takes effect, the ban will essentially forbid Cole Bros. Circus—in which animals such as elephants and tigers play an integral role—to operate in Plymouth…

The Plymouth Airport Commission confirmed the circus will perform as scheduled on June 18 and 19. "We felt we had an obligation" to continue with the shows, said Kenneth Fosdick, chairman of the commission.

"Animals have always been an important part of the American circus, and they are certainly part of our circus, and part of our show," said (Cole Bros.) marketing director Bill Carter. "At this point, we would have no plans to come back to Plymouth without the animals."[27]

Occasionally Mother Nature also played havoc with the show's operations. Veteran circus photographer Paul Gutheil was on hand on the first day of rain-and-mud-hampered performances at Ridgefield, New Jersey (June 12-15). The stand, he wrote for a circus fans publication, "was pretty much a weather nightmare for the first two days and the lot became a genuine muddy mess…It was so bad that they had to park the cannon inside the back door and a section of seats in the corner of the big top was removed so the globe could be permanently placed…Performers entered and exited by a side emergency exit where gravel had been placed outside and inside the big top to facilitate dry comings and goings."[28]

Tent shows have always been at the mercy of the elements, as they were when Cole Bros. appeared in Ridgefield, New Jersey, June 15, 2014.

Paul Gutheil photograph

Eliminating seats verboten

If there's anything that rankled Johnny Pugh, in his early days as general manager, more than a dirty canvas big top, it was the absence of bleacher sections inside.

Johnny Pugh always made sure that every seat was set up under the big top, even when large crowds were not expected.
Paul Gutheil photograph

> I can remember when I first joined this show, and basically the biggest thing that went on was the telephone solicitation--it's now become a thing of the past. And the first thing each morning that the candy butchers and the tent crew would ask was "How's the sale here?" I'd tell them the sale [of advance tickets], and all of a sudden, I discover they only put-up half of the reserves or didn't unfold all of the seat wagons. And I'd say to myself, "Well, I guess this is the way this thing runs." In my time [as GM and owner] we always put up all the seats unless there was some reason that we couldn't physically set the seats. Because you're here to do business. You're here to make the people comfortable.
>
> I also remember in the old days they'd take down the front door the minute the last show started. And I still have trouble with them sometimes with them taking things away right before the end of the show. But, you know, those people bought a ticket. They're entitled to see the show and not walk out to see half the tent is missing.

"Yes, our show is a heavy show to set. But we have to set every one of those chairs and take them down at each spot."[29] During a video interview in his coach, Pugh reflected on the show's business in late June. "This season has certainly been slower," he readily admitted.

> I feel that many people just don't have the money. Coming up from the South, it was okay. But once we got up into the North, they may have had a severe winter and money got tight. I just hope they recover soon. Usually, we average the same amount of income year in and year out. This one is down a little this spring. I'm not saying we're not going to make it up this fall, because I've done it, many, many times. We try to guess the economy six or eight months of being here. But we're not in one place where you can guess what's going to happen tomorrow. We're jumping all over the place. [30]

2015 season "always in the hole."

Based on his observations as ringmaster, Chris Connors summed up his feelings about the shortened season, "2014 wasn't a grand year moneywise," he said. "Johnny tried everything in his power to get us out there. His motto was always to 'get us out of the barn and get us back safely.' He wanted to make sure that he had the money to come back (to winter quarters) and to get the show prepared for the next season. Unfortunately, in 2014 that never happened. He had just enough to what he had to do for 2015."[31]

"We never came back in the red until the last year," Pugh said.[32]

From the owner's perspective, his cash-strapped enterprise barely scraped together money to get the show on the road. Even before the opening stand in DeLand on March 21-22, the financial picture was murky at best. "I took a lien on winter quarters," he said.[33]

"Funds were cut short by the bank," Pugh said. "They deducted $80,000 for equipment the show purchased from Mexico off the top of our [requested] loan. So, I was down eighty-thousand before I started. I was always in the hole by a little bit." [34]

A combination of factors kept Cole Bros. in the red throughout much of the tour. Chief among them was the route itself, booked largely from the circus office and requiring numerous long jumps with fewer travel days. Also, the reduced size of the advance

For more than a decade ringmaster Chris Connors kept the circus running on time.
James Cole photograph

corps—from ten marketing directors during the previous season to a low of only four or five; and the lack of money to pay deposits for prime lots. The route had been altered to divert the circus to play ten stands in Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Ohio. These changes had been timed to Cole Bros.' appearance in mid-July at the inaugural Worldwide Circus Summit in Massachusetts, a commitment the show's owner made during the previous season.

The turnout for this unfamiliar circus in the public's mind was underwhelming, to say the least.

> We played one gigantic mall in Northern Ohio where the only thing left in it was a hot dog stand," Pugh said. "I remember that if you bought two hotdogs, you got a free milkshake. (laughing) Does that tell you something?
>
> I can remember when we played a beautiful mall in Ohio, and I went into the barbershop and got a haircut, and I said to the guy, 'How's business been?' And he said, 'Well, it's been great until this week.' And it was the week that [an automotive manufacturer] laid off for the changeover in the cars.
>
> Ohio was a disaster; it destroyed us. Erie was the only spot in Pennsylvania where we did business. We played three days [Monday-Wednesday]. We had a great show, but we died on the third day.

As a result of accumulative problems, Pugh said the show's income "was half of what I normally take in."[35] To compensate for inadequate funding from the outset and throughout much of the tour, the show had to cut expenses without affecting the performance. For example, that meant there would be no printed program available for patrons to purchase. This was an unfortunate first for Pugh, who joined Beatty-Cole as a performer in 1962.

Cost-cutting measures also translated to reducing the effectiveness of the advance. Fewer marketing directors were spread thin to cover more towns over wider geography, detracting them from making key contacts with the media and influential community constituents. Gone, too, was the fulltime advance clown, who with remaining team members were responsible for promoting ticket sales. Their combined efforts, including those of the Florida office advance staff, were aimed at filling the seats and spurring additional concession sales.

In addition, the trickle-down impact translated into fewer requests for local media interviews and on-site coverage on show days, again with intent to draw last-minute, impulsive viewers and readers to showgrounds.

From nearly the beginning Ringmaster Connors noticed declining interest among electronic and print media to publicize tent raising activities and to encounter the stars of the show prior to the first performance. For the traditionally lucrative Azalea Festival stand in Wilmington, North Carolina, Conners said he fielded a lackluster four media interviews, compared to as many as thirty opportunities in prior seasons. "In some New Jersey and Long Island stands, and for the rest of the season, I would take our three clowns in full costume to town on set-up days, and we would go to different stores to distribute free kid's tickets." Billposters

Despite dwindling audiences and cost-cutting, Pugh always gave his audience a traditional production number.
James Cole photograph

also were stretched thin, Connors noted. The normal two-week interval ahead of show dates was often shortened, "and sometimes he would come into a town a week before we got there," the performance director said. "At times we were having problems just getting paper."

Traditional clowns were always a part of Johnny Pugh's circus. Parada Morales parodied the big cat act by running around the hippodrome track accompanied by a large dog dressed as a tiger.
James Cole photograph

Missed paydays "tense"

All too often, Connors said, performers faced dwindling crowds. Regardless the attendance, the same sizeable crews were needed to set up the tent, seating and apparatus supporting the two-hour performance. Insufficient revenue to meet the average daily nut of $31,000 led to occasional delayed or missed paydays. "It was tense," Connors recalled. "At times I would go to certain performers, and they yelled and screamed at me. That was because many of them had their own cars and trailers, and they really needed the money to support their families and animals." Single performers and workers were housed in four newly built sleepers.

"I really applaud all those people—working men, everybody—because it affected everybody on the show that the money wasn't coming in," Connors said. "And we would play a lot of new towns. We did have a few good ones, but not enough to really help. I think what hurt the show the most was all these big jumps," he contended. "And at that time the cost of fuel was really hurting the show."[36] The tour's longest overnight jump of 268 miles brought the sleep-deprived outfit from Auburn, New York, to the Big E fairgrounds in West Springfield, Massachusetts for a two-day stand. Fatigued from the arduous set up, performers entertained more than 800 attendees at the Worldwide Circus Summit 2015 at the evening show on July 15.

WCS organizer Gary Payne, who also served as national president of the Circus Fans of America, recalled that he and other volunteers were pressed into bill-posting duties in downtown Springfield mere days before the circus arrived.[37] Circus front man Connors said marketing director Bill Carter, who normally would have been assigned to devote much of a month at designated cities promoting the show ahead of circus day, "was doing five other towns besides the Summit, traveling back and forth. And that was a mistake. Because when you stretch somebody too thin, even the marketing guys, they can do just so much."[38]

Pugh to Circus Summit crowds: 'Help us!"

Pugh participated in a panel discussion with other show owners and producers. He also was the featured speaker for the event's closing banquet. Few summit attendees, outside of key WCS organizers, knew of the show's dire financial circumstances. In his off-the-cuff remarks during the circus producer's session, Pugh addressed his plight in a direct manner.

> We still carry animals and, thanks to you, as long as I'm the owner I'd love to have the animals…Unfortunately, people come to the show and they love the show, and they love animals… At the time they leave the show they are willing to help us. But once they leave they are not…You want to know something? You're not looking at some showman here; you're looking at an endangered species…So for God's sake, help us! Help us! Help us! Help us! We need help.[39]

Wayne McCary, Summit co-general chairman and former president of the Eastern States Exposition, heaped praise on Pugh at the Summit's closing banquet.

Johnny Pugh (right) brought Cole Bros. to the World Circus Summit in Springfield, Massachusetts in July 2015. The showground was provided by Wayne McCary, President of the Eastern States Exhibition.
Paul Gutheil photograph

> I can honestly tell you that I have the most respect for your guest of honor tonight of anybody who's ever been in the circus industry in North America. It's not often that a man or woman becomes a legend in your own lifetime. This man is a living legend. We went to him when we thought about having the conference here at the Big E (Eastern States Exposition). And we said, "John, we have to have Cole Bros. Circus as part of this Summit." He said, looking at me, "You know what? I don't know how much it will cost, and I don't know exactly how I'll do it. But I'm going to do it.

> I'm going to bring the show home to the Big E. Cole Brothers and its employees in this largest tented circus in America is on the road today, tonight and tomorrow because of one man, one individual: John W. Pugh.[40]

Also, likely unaware of the show's on-going tribulations, circus historian Herbert Ueckert lauded owner Pugh for his "unparalleled generosity" for bringing Cole Bros. to the Summit. But Ueckert's review of the opening show in the *Circus Report* also cited the "the absence of a printed program and the inability to hear all the announcements. "Purists will note the absence of a flying trapeze act, of horses, and perhaps other elements. The program was obviously stronger with aerial acts than with ground acts. However, the Summit attendees were overwhelmingly enthusiastic in their response and reaction to this largely traditional tented circus."[41]

During a backyard conversation on the following morning, elephant trainer Tim Frisco told the author to "look around, Lane. You're not going to see a big show like this again."[42] Connors noted that "we had a lot of towners come out for the first show. But then, the next day, not so much. And that seemed to be the way with our show that year."[43] In retrospect, Pugh expressed disappointment with the outcome of the two-day stand. "It's not that I regret doing it, because it was a success as far as the circus fans were concerned. But financially, it was a big loss for me."[44]

The circus limped on to New York stands in Rotterdam and Monticello and at the Belmont Park racetrack in Elmont, rejoining its normal route in Eastern and Southern communities. Due to the aggressive lobbying and picketing by animal rights protesters on Long Island, Cole Bros. had been denied a permit to

Tim and Hayley Frisco presented elephants at the Worldwide Circus Summit in Springfield, Massachusetts in July 2015.
James Cole photograph

The Aguilar highwire troupe was one of the thrill acts during the final season of 2015.
Paul Gutheil photograph

play an East Islip city park on May 5, a long-sponsored date. But the show trouped on with other Long Island stands (July 27-August 9).

Veteran circus follower and reviewer Harry Kingston and his wife drove from Beaumont, Texas to Slidell, Louisiana on October 6 to witness a performance and to share mementos with Pugh and Bale. "And they had great TV ads for Slidell, Houma and Hammond," Kingston mentioned in his subsequent write-up for the *Circus Report*.[45] "The owner said the advertising budget averaged 'almost $4,000' per day, with much of that budget being directed to TV commercials by the show's Florida staff, which bought and placed ads."[46]

Pugh said the Slidell lot was a replacement for a busy shopping mall venue where the circus had set up in past seasons. The circus could not afford the hefty deposit for the lot along Interstate 10, so it took the less desirable location. "We were on a lot we shouldn't have been on. We ended up in a place where they slept in doorways."[47]

The Texas fan predicted, "I'm sure Johnny and Elvin will have many surprises for us fans when Cole Bros. starts its 2016 edition up I-95."[48] Kingston and a multitude of other Cole Bros. devotees were in for a big surprise when the circus collapsed just one month later.

Cole Bros. nears the end

As the tour wound down, Connors said he changed the performance roster of the CIRCUS TO THE MAX-themed show, moving the Aguilar high wire troupe into the opening spot, but keeping daredevil "Rafa" (a.k.a. Romanian gymnast Raphael Christian Ceae in his first and only season on the show) as the human cannonball catapulted out of Bale's "world's largest cannon" for the finale.[49] "A lot of us who were 'with it' for many years saw that it was coming to an end," Connors said. "Toward the end, it was so rough financially that a lot of the people, weren't getting paid on time. It happened about four times that year where we weren't being paid every week. Being paid every two weeks or three weeks. Unfortunately, a lot of people, including myself and my brother [Greg, who worked in the ticket office wagon] really got hammered."[50]

Pugh said people on the show "could sense it all the time. I mean, we weren't doing the business that you normally do. Finally, I decided to close it."[51]

After playing scheduled dates in Georgia, Alabama, Louisiana and Florida, the outfit straggled into Melbourne for a November 2-4 stand, then to Port St. Lucie where, four days later, Pugh pulled the plug, abandoning stands in a half-dozen Florida communities. Although some Cole Bros. employees were bitter about the outcome, Pugh said he maintained good relations with Elvin Bale "until the last year. Elvin was a sharp guy [but] we had a little falling out."[52]

The owner, who habitually skipped the final performance of past season, was on hand for the traditional playing of "Auld Lang Syne" following the closing spec on November 8. That was the last time Pugh's enterprise played under the Cole Bros Circus title, whose fleet had traveled 10,500 miles in 2015. Pugh then headed to DeLand ahead of the rest of the troupe. "We took everything back to winter quarters," he said.[53] The next day the owner handed out one week's salary in cash to employees. "At the end of the season, I couldn't give out bonuses."[54]

Connors and his younger brother remained for a short time in winter quarters to tackle odd jobs there and in the surrounding community. Others found employment with other circuses or businesses.[55] Later, the circus declared bankruptcy. "I filed to save winter quarters," Pugh said.[56] However, the showman said, "I never gave up. I had two or three people who were going to lend me the money, and—to get it out [in 2016]. I cut them a really good deal, but they backed out on me."[57]

Three-decade sponsor delivers epitaph

As the New Year dawned, long-time sponsors were learning that Pugh's shuttered outfit would not be returning. Among the mourners was the North Carolina Azalea Festival. "Thousands of Wilmingtonians and visitors and visitors alike enjoyed time at the Cole Bros. Circus during the Festival each year," said an announcement issued by organizers. Shortly afterwards, the show declared bankruptcy.

> The Cole Bros. Circus was founded in 1884 as the "W.W. Cole's Colossal Shows.' During the 1920s, the show traveled to the western frontier, making appearances at military bases, mining camps, and in remote boomtowns. The circus has been a standing staple of American history—surviving during the Great Depression, their road show to the improvements in transportation (from horse-drawn parades to double-length rail cars to automobiles and trucks), and even appearing in President Harry Truman's inaugural parade in Washington,

D.C., when the team calliope played "Meet Me in St. Louis, Louie."[58]

In recent years, children of all ages enjoyed the "human cannonball," the motorcycle acts, dog shows, and flying trapeze feats. North Carolina Azalea Festival President, Robby Collins states, "The Cole Bros. Circus has been an important part of Festival history. For over thirty years, thousands of children have experienced thrill of these acts, while spending time with their families. We know this will be a disappointment to everyone who enjoyed the special times and making these memories."[59]

The spokesman for a two-decade North Carolina sponsor – the Havelock, North Carolina Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 7315 – was less forgiving in a local newspaper interview when informed that Cole Bros. would not be coming for an April 18-23 stand.

A frustrated George Cook reported [on April 20] that the show was off. "We got confirmation this morning that the circus is cancelling. They are having trouble getting workers to set it up," Cook said. "They needed $55,000 to get started and they didn't have it, so they just cancelled for the year. It's over, done." Cook said.

Cook thought the VFW had a contract, but he didn't hear back from the circus representative and reached out to find out what was happening. "We got our money back. We put $1,500 out for the water and park and I went and got it all back this morning," said Cook. "It's stringing along hoping and hoping, then nothing…" Cook's contact with the circus has quit and is working with another show of some kind.

The show has raised thousands of dollars for VFW and its causes over the years. "I enjoyed being out there helping people, helping the wheelchairs, and everything," Cook said.[60]

Pugh down, but not out

Even as he approached his 75th birthday, Johnny Pugh wasn't ready to hang up his circus-owner's credentials. He financially backed Richard "Dickie" Garden to field a circus in 2016, this time with a different

Johnny Pugh started with Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. as a performer in 1962. He eventually became the owner of the circus, which he closed at the end of the 2015 season.

Tegge Circus Archives

title: King Cole. The venture began with a bang but ended in a whisper. Whatever potential it had; the venture was short-lived. Using mostly former Cole Bros. equipment and personnel, Garden pieced together a route that initially was to hit the road in early summer. After making only two stands in North Carolina, the show folded in July and returned to DeLand. One year later, Pugh sold the crimson-and-gold big top and "some equipment" to Garden.[61]

Meanwhile, circus-related publications were at a loss for hard information. Blogger David Hammarstrom, a well-known circus historian and biographer of John Ringling North, posted on April 7, "The show's winter quarters up for sale: The price tag: $350,000." (Pugh later confirmed to this author that he had sold the DeLand home base in 2021 for "around $300,000.")[62] Continued Hammarstrom's posting: "Know what? I am deeply depressed. This marks the passing of a great and durable and classy American big top we are likely never to see again. Remember 1957? So, too, may they one day remember 2016. Ringling retired the elephants. Cole retired itself. Pray that's not all to come this season."[63]

That, too, was not to be. The Big Apple Circus announced it would be no longer tour. Ringling Bros., which informed the circus world in 2015 that it would no longer be carrying elephants as of 2018, took them off the road permanently in 2016. Following the 2017 season John Ringling North II sold Kelly Miller Circus, which he had owned since 2008.

Both Ringling rail units gave their final performances in 2017 and returned to Florida. Pugh said he later sold the titles of Cole Bros, King, and Sells & Grey.

When asked what he might have done differently to keep his show on the road, he replied, "I think I would have cut things back sooner."[64] Pugh recalled a warning once issued by his former boss, Frank McClosky, about cutting corners to take out a lesser-quality Beatty-Cole performance:

> Frank said to me, "I'll show you how you can make money with the circus. Don't take the Beatty show out there. You never go in with a big show. Take the King show—and he did that one time. He called it King Cole. "Cut this thing down to nothing and make a lot of money. Grab the money and run." But, he said, "you can do it once only." And he was right.[65]

As to any potential circus owner who approached Pugh for advice: "I'd tell them to build a show like mine would cost a fortune."[66]

Johnny Pugh started with Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. as a performer in 1962. He eventually became the owner of the circus, which he closed at the end of the 2015 season.

Tegge Circus Archives

Johnny Pugh spent a lifetime with the circus. He is seen here with his sister Heather on the Mills Bros. Circus in 1948. John Pugh Collection

Pugh: 'I've done my bit.'

Asked how he would like to be remembered for his fifty-three consecutive years on the same circus. Pugh replied: "I like to think I've done my bit. But, you know, one person doesn't make a circus. A circus is a family. Right up from the working man, everybody is important. I've been very fortunate to have good people around me who have worked for me, some of them for thirty years. And I think, yes, they might remember my name, but I always say, 'Hey, if it wasn't for you guys, I wouldn't be here.'"[67]

The Circus Ring of Fame plaque presented to John W. Pugh at the 2010 induction ceremony summarized his contributions to the circus industry:

> British by birth, he lived the American dream of rising from a trampoline performer, into a giant among circus impresarios. As owner of the mighty Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. Circus, he preserved the traditions of the traveling three-ring circus, with his impeccable standards of excellence and knack for knowing what audiences desire.

Acknowledgements

The author expresses his gratitude to John W. Pugh for taking the time to be interviewed in person and by telephone over a 15-year period, and for sharing photos from his private collection. In addition, he is thankful the insights of former VP-operations Elvin Bale and ringmaster-performance director Christopher Connors to enhance the articles. And to editors Greg Parkinson and Chris Berry for expert guidance; to Maureen Brunsdale, Special Collections librarian and her staff at Illinois State University's Milner Library, for permitting the reproduction of historic images; and to the many circus historians and photographers who contributed to the research and writing of this *Bandwagon* series.

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Part V

Dutch Treat:

THE FANCIFUL FOOTWORK OF MISS LONI

BY TIMOTHY NOEL TEGGE

Magnificent Miss Loni, taking her bow in the center ring of the Miller-Johnson Circus, 1973.

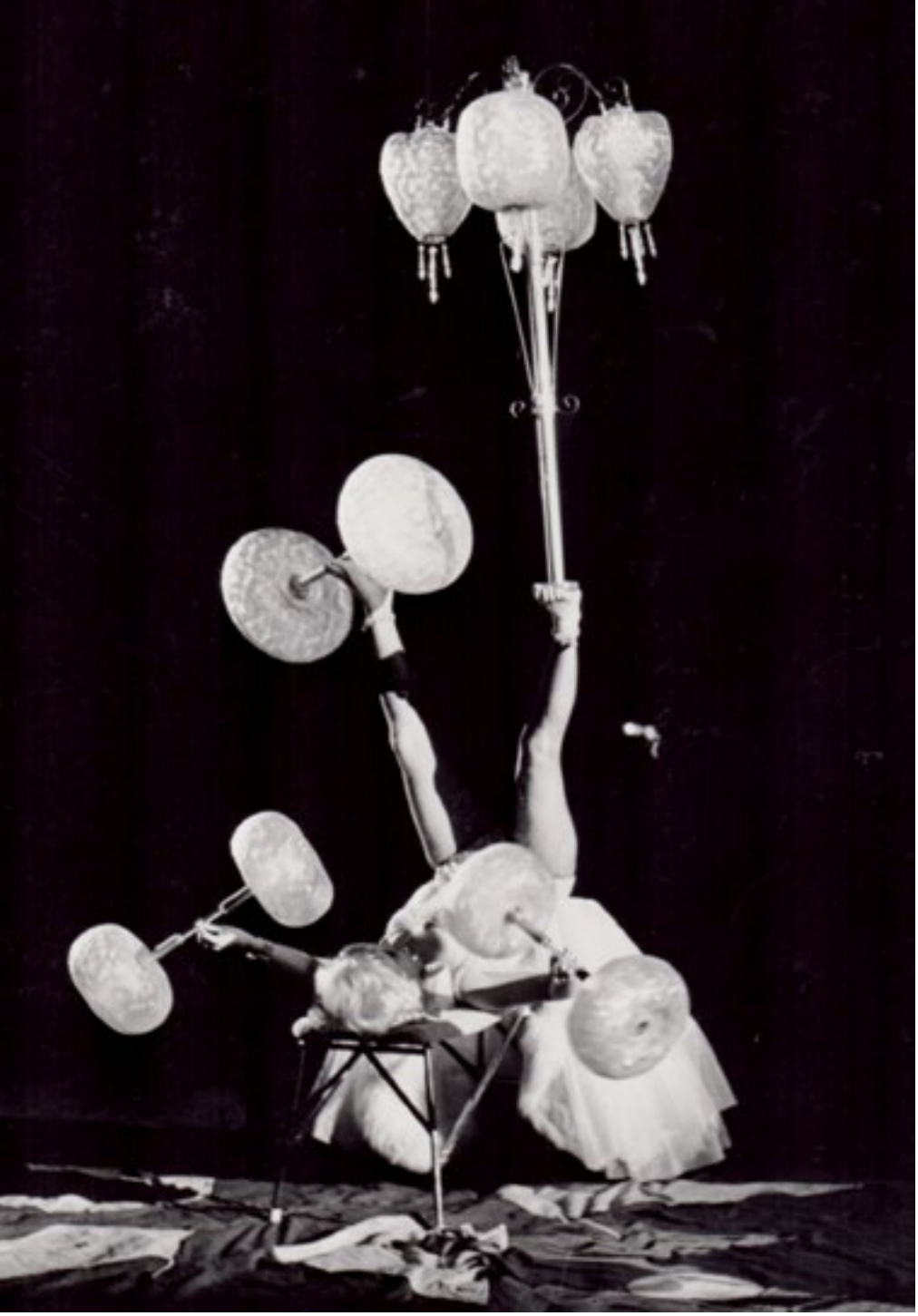
It was pretty much impossible to guesstimate which direction the show business pendulum might swing when that symbolic ball dropped in Times Square on New Year's Eve 1970. The nation and the world had seen and been through a lot over the past decade. An American moon landing, a "British Invasion," a sexual revolution, and the lingering effects of both war and civil disorder all kept humankind on the edge of their seats, looking for answers and searching for something—anything—to relieve mounting tension and uncertainty. Amidst the yearning for a different approach to just about everything, the new counter-culture had auspiciously saved a place for the variety arts, especially the circus.

To this new generation in particular, circus stood as a shining example of free-spiritedness and expressionism. Hippies, Yippies, and The Establishment alike embraced a new wave of theatrical nostalgia. Although costumes turned day-glo and sported peace signs, paisley, and flowers as a sign of the times, show business was very much alive and well, and the circus held its own as remaining "in" and "groovy."

Miss Loni glided smoothly into the new decade via Harold Minsky's illustrious Follies—a perfect example of old-school show business in a new era—delivering her on the doorstep of summer when her Lake Geneva Playboy Club contract reached its end in late June 1970. For the remainder of the year, she worked her usual cornucopia of bookings, everything from high-class hotel showrooms to pastoral county fairs, and anything in between.

Having been sought after for decades by agents and producers across the globe, all of whom were very familiar with the quality of her act and the nature of her pure professionalism, Loni never lacked offers for work months or even years in advance. But their daughter, now about twelve years old, was attending regular grammar school in Park Ridge, Illinois, and the Van Voordens had agreed to remain stateside permanently, unless an incredible once-in-a-lifetime opportunity presented itself. While her parents traveled across the country, Barbara Ann stayed behind with her grandmother for much of the year, living in the family's double-wide mobile home at the Forest Trailer Park, long a hub for acts based in and traveling through the Midwest.

As Freddie was setting dates in the fall for the 1971 season, Hubert Castle, a featured performer in previous decades and now a circus producer, contacted the Van Voordens with a proposal to play his en-



Loni's featured "Blackout" trick in motion. She twirled chrome-plated batons with illuminated inflatables in each hand and on her left foot, while her right foot twirled a chrome-plated pillar with matching inflatables and chandelier crystals. In a darkened big top, arena, or showroom it created a dramatic effect.

tire season: twenty-five weeks, beginning in January. But Freddie had already scheduled Loni tightly with various engagements through the first quarter of the year, and each week was getting queries for summer and fall dates. Castle agreed to use her on whatever open dates she might still have available throughout the remainder of the coming year, then implored that she sign right away for the entire 1972 season. Hubert Castle's reputation as a producer paralleled that of Loni's as an artiste. Without hesitation, Freddie gladly accepted the contract.[1] Miss Loni was booked a year and a half in advance for another extensive tour across the U.S. and Canada.

Just ten days after the start of the new year, Miss Loni found herself flipping her props about in the La Ronde Room of Miami's opulent Fontainbleau Hotel. Four days later, on January 14, she appeared at the Radisson Hotel in Minneapolis, and two days after that, another show at the Pantlind Hotel in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Each of these three engagements was for a different agency, verifying just how expansive the pool of show business arbitrators had become.[2]

On January 25, 1971, Loni and Freddie played the first of several "spot dates" in that year for Hubert Castle: the Saladin Temple Shrine Circus, a six-day stand, also in Grand Rapids, Michigan.[3] Interspersed between a host of miscellaneous bookings (the occasional sport show, corporate shows, conventions, etc.), were more circus dates: some for Castle, as well as other producers, including Paul Kaye and George Hubler.

Shrine Circuses rarely received much ink in the dailies once the show had opened. Perhaps there would be a photo or two with a caption, or possibly one human interest story, but that was about it. The crux of any feature came from show-generated press releases, trumpeting headlines like "The Circus Is Coming (next month/next week, etc.)" in an attempt to build advance ticket sales. Occasionally there might be a genuine review of the program, usually the day after its inaugural performance. One such item ran in the pages of *The Sioux City Journal* on Wednesday, April 14. Staff writer Julie Goodson's recap of the 21st Annual Abu Bekr Shrine Circus was as observant as it was glowing.

Hubert Castle, circa 1970. A former tight-wire sensation in the 1930's and 1940's turned show producer, he is fondly remembered by anyone who ever worked for him as a true gentleman, and one of the finest producers in the industry. Photograph by Edmond Motta, Tegge Archives.

> Hubert Castle, producer of Hubert Castle International Circus, is to be complimented for his ability to package a wholesome, attractive number of new and different novelty, thrill and comedy numbers in the 1971 offering.
>
> The Shrine Circus has come of age—age twenty-one—and reflects the Age of Aquarius with its moon module, futuristic spaceship and even moon-bound balloons. To determine which portion rated as the audience's most favorite is almost impossible.[4]
>
> A few short paragraphs later, Goodson details:
>
> But the real show stoppers are provided by 'Miss Loni', an eye-catching blonde who lives up to her billing as 'the world's greatest foot juggler'; 'The Triska Troupe', two glamourous gals and a lone male high wire man who with reckless abandon dance and somersault blindfolded high above the auditorium floor; 'The Tabaks,' Hungarian 'super-stars' who do unusual acrobatic feats on a colorful moon module; 'La Norma,' the Danish darling who whirls her way into the crowd's very heart, and 'Miss Tabarro,' a dainty miss performing hair-raising aerial feats—actually hanging by her hair.[5]

The first two weeks in August placed the Van Voorden family close to Park Ridge once again, working a few different fairs scattered between the south Chicago suburb of Crete; further south, to Bloomington; and then back north, to Woodstock, Illinois. Miss Loni shared the grandstand bills with such nationally recognized headliners as Grandpa Jones, from CBS Television's popular weekly "Hee-Haw," singer Anita Bryant, and NBC Television's Saturday morning kid-show sensation, The Banana Splits, to name a few.

It was during this stretch of the summer, while crisscrossing from one fair to the next, that Loni and Freddie caught wind of trouble brewing at the Forest Trailer Park. The owners of the property had been in negotiation with high-dollar investors who had their eye on that particular tract for some time. The acreage was surrounded by some of the most expensive homes in the village, and the intention of the prospective buyers was to bulldoze the site completely for the development of condominiums. With little warning, residents of the park were suddenly threatened with the reality of the land being sold off in the potentially not-too-distant future, pressuring occupants to get out.[6] The risk of their permanent address being abruptly sold out from under them while hundreds or thousands of miles away did not sit well with Loni and Freddie. Uncertain as to how quickly the closing of the park could actually be, they felt it necessary to prepare for the worst as soon as possible. Already in the midst of a busy summer and fall's assortment of bookings, they were now being confronted with an unforeseen relocation.

Loni's daughter, Barbara, remembered driving through a number of small towns in southern Illinois with her parents about this time, en route to and from a string of fair dates. On one such jaunt, they found themselves in southeastern Madison County, Illinois, 40 miles east of Saint Louis, Missouri. "I don't know if we stopped there for gas, or lunch, or whatever," Barbara mentioned, "…but for some reason Loni wanted to drive around [the town] and see what it looked like." While doing so, they passed by a house with a large cement foundation adjacent to it, where a mobile

home had recently been removed. There was a "For Sale" sign in prominent view. "The next thing I knew, they [Loni and Freddie] were contacting the realtor to take a closer look at the lot and make an offer on the property. It all seemed so impetuous."[7] Nevertheless, when they returned from playing the first week of September at the Canadian National Exposition in Toronto, the Van Voordens' mobile home was transported from Park Ridge and installed on the vacant slab in the small farming community of Highland, Illinois.

To a twelve-year-old, who had grown up in a suburb of Chicago and had already traveled extensively across the United States, Canada, and abroad, being displaced to a small town in the middle of Cornfield, USA, was about as sensible as living on the moon. The moon would have actually been a lot more appealing to Barbara. But alas, there she was with her parents and grandmother, marking time in alien surroundings between show excursions.

Geographically, Highland was positioned in the center of the country, and one could journey just about everywhere north, south, east, or west with little impediment. And since the family was constantly crossing back and forth playing dates, it did not really matter where home base was. Barbara returned again to the world of correspondence to continue her schooling. At some point during the coming spring, she also casually began working on a foot juggling turn of her own. Her father had fabricated a practice *bokje* just for her during the family's short time home and it would accompany them wherever they wandered from that point forward. After their first winter in Highland, Miss Loni, Freddie, and Barbara Ann headed to their first 1972 date with the Hubert Castle International 3-ring Circus: January 26-29, in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Hubert Castle retained a stellar cast of artists, fleshing out his program with thirty different acts spread over three rings, many of them working in displays throughout the course of the show. There was an abundance of animal features, including the Janmar Elephants, under the direction of Bert and Sandy Pettus, Wally Naghtin's Bears, Anden's Poodles, Lacy's Seals, Semon's Chimpanzees, and a relatively new wild animal act presented by Roger Smith.

There were also aerialists dangling on various contraptions in every direction, from single trapeze virtuosos to the traditional triple-somersaulting fly and return number, presented by the Flying Valentines. Daredevil Johnny Luxem and his "wheel of destiny" closed out the first half of the performance and the Great Bruno, champion of the breakaway sway pole, brought the second half to its climax. Sprinkled about this mass of confusion were teeterboard titans, globe rollers, and perch pole perfectionists, and in the center ring of a three-ring frenzy was the one and only "Miss Loni."[8]

HUBERT CASTLE
INTERNATIONAL
3-RING
CIRCUS
PERMANENT ADDRESS
1960 Peavy Road – Dallas, Texas 75228
No. 1 ★ OFFICIAL ROUTE ★ 1972

DATE	CITY	STATE
JAN. 24 thru 29	GRAND RAPIDS	Michigan
FEB. 4, 5 & 6	FT. WAYNE	Indiana
9 thru 13	MEMPHIS	Tennessee
18, 19 & 20	TUCSON	Arizona
25, 26 & 27	ALBUQUERQUE	New Mexico
MARCH 3 & 4	ODESSA	Texas
9 thru 12	PORTLAND	Oregon
13 & 14	SALEM	Oregon
16 thru 19	SPOKANE	Washington
16 thru 25	DAYTON	Ohio
23 thru 26	LOS ANGELES	California

JIMMY ARMSTRONG—MAIL AGENT
A SPANGLELAND FANTASY

Route card number 1 for the 1972 season of the Hubert Castle International Circus. The town of Dayton, Ohio, shown in red, was a "double date" for the show, which meant that Castle had a second unit playing at the same time the main unit was in Spokane, Washington.

After hours camaraderie south of the border. A tableful of circus personalities "whooping it up" at the Alcazar Bar and Restaurant in Juarez, Mexico, after an evening performance of the Hubert Castle Circus in El Paso, Texas, October 1972. Left to right are: Barbara and Freddie Van Voorden, Lazlo Toth, Russell Darr, Rex Young, restaurant proprietor (unknown), Cleo Plunkett, Eunice Darr, Lucy Toth, baby Stephanie Darr, and Loni.

Like Circus Maximus a few years earlier, and the Polack show of a decade past, this was one mammoth production. Aside from a route laden with more than its share of sizeable jumps from time to time, the show was a pleasure to travel with. Castle himself was very cool, calm, and collected at all times, and his demeanor seemed to set and carry the tone of all who were on board for the ride.

In July 1972, while on tour with Castle, Loni and Freddie were contacted by Gilbert Miller, a well-known agent operating from the northwest Chicago suburb of Skokie, regarding a thirty-plus week season with a California-based show that was planning a major expansion for 1973. The owner of the show, Clifford Vargas, had acquired the waning Miller-Johnson Circus from previous owner, Charles Germaine, in 1969. Vargas had sold his house in San Francisco to buy Germaine's equipment along with what remained of his route and was slowly nursing the show back to health.[9]

With a few years under his belt as owner-proprietor of Miller-Johnson, Cliff Vargas set his sights on taking his newly revamped show across the country in 1973, proclaiming that it would be "A RETURN TO THE RICH TRADITION OF THE CIRCUS AS IT ONCE WAS IN AMERICA."[10] He intended to assemble the most impressive collection of top-notch acts in the United States to date, and present them under what he wanted to be the largest tent travelling across the country. To pull it off, he would have to secure talent early on.

Knowing that Castle liked to change his show as much as possible each season, Freddie first checked with him to see if there was an interest in repeating Loni for a second consecutive year. When Castle gave him a green light he began negotiating with Gil Miller, who was not kin to the circus's Miller namesake. After reaching an agreement on July 11, 1972, Loni

Having just tossed her ball into space and awaiting foot contact, Miss Loni is pictured in the center ring of the Miller-Johnson Circus in Waukegan, Illinois, August 28, 1973. Freddie, barely visible in the darkness to her far left, kneels on guard. The illuminated arch bearing the show's name, seen in the background, was built by Freddie.
Photo by Timothy Noel Tegge.

and Freddie signed a 32-week "as per route" contract with Cliff Vargas.[11]

The Miller-Johnson Circus was the largest tented spectacle that Miss Loni had appeared with since her 1950-1951 seasons with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, and this time around, she was a center-ring feature under its gigantic new big top.

"I remember a lot about that year [1973]. It was the first time I was ever really around a tent show for an entire season," recalled Barbara, whose job, at age fourteen, was to run one of the spotlights on Miller-Johnson. "I'm pretty sure we opened around Miami."[12] Her memory was pretty good: the season actually kicked off with a one-day stand at Hollywood, Florida, on January 28th and then hopped about twenty miles over to the parking lot of Miami Stadium for a four-day stand, beginning on January 30th. From there they moved to the Polo Grounds at Palm Beach, Florida, on February 5-7, and next to Tampa, on February 8-10.[13]

"Some of the towns we played along the way were open air—like on a fairground, and not under canvas. I guess it [setting up the tent] depended on how far the jumps were from town to town. I think we even worked in a couple of buildings here and there. And I remember going from one end of the country to the other and back again, sometimes making really big jumps in short amounts of time."[14]

Miller-Johnson spent about a month in Florida before it started bouncing frantically across the southern states, stopping in Birmingham, Alabama, on March

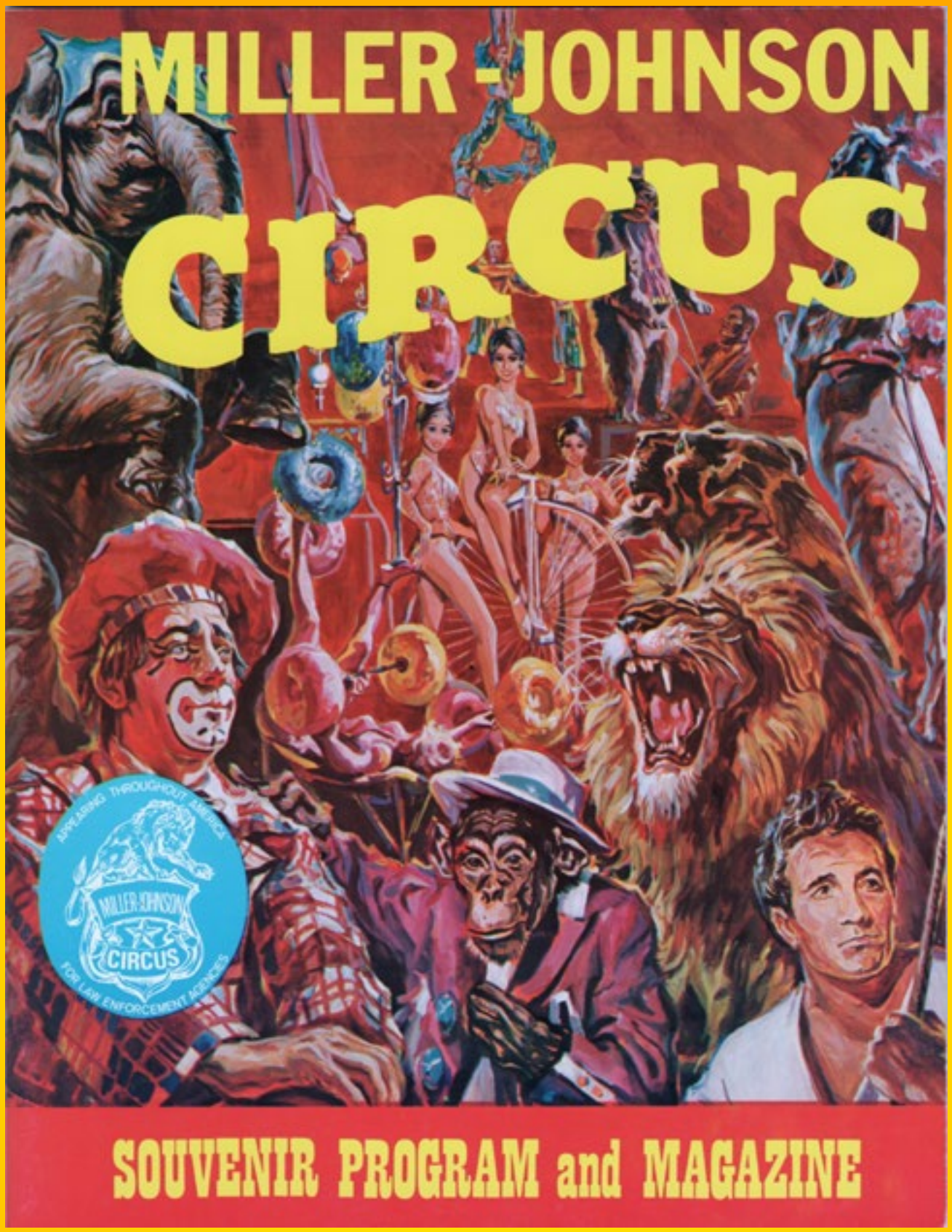
The Miller-Johnson Circus on the lot, minus the big top, in Waukegan, Illinois, August 28, 1973.
Photo by Timothy Noel Tegge.

5 and 6, then moving nearly 500 miles to Marshall, Texas, for a one-day stand on March 10. Three days later the show was in Tulsa, from March 13 to 15, followed by a two-day stand in Lawton, Oklahoma. The caravan then doubled back to Kingsville, Texas (near Corpus Christi)—a mere 497 miles—for a one-day stand March 20, before embarking on their next expedition west, to El Paso (another walloping 600 miles), showing there from March 24 through 26. Next on the route was Odessa, Texas, a one-day stand on March 28 that broke another 700-mile jaunt to Denver, Colorado, where they exhibited from March 31 through April 2. And from Denver, an 840-mile jump into Southern California, opening in Northridge on April 6 for twelve days at the Devonshire Downs racetrack.

After about six weeks in California, showing in a dozen or so locations, the show continued its tour, stopping in Provo, Utah, en route to Colorado for a few dates; Greely, Pueblo, and Colorado Springs, then quickly through Kansas and Nebraska by the end of May. The first week of June found the show in Wisconsin, then into Michigan, working its way east through upstate New York, Connecticut, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, eventually depositing the convoy in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, for shows on August 20-21.

After a hurried five days across North Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia the circus was in Waukegan, Illinois, at the end of the month. Then, the entire company doubled back to New York City for a 23-day run at the Louis Armstrong Memorial Stadium (originally the Singer Bowl), in Flushing Meadows, Queens.[15] "We had already spent several weeks in New York state and out east and thought we would keep heading west. Next thing we knew, Vargas had everyone driving back to New York City. It was pretty insane, as I recall," snickered Barbara, "and I think some of the equipment broke down on the way back [to New York]. At least that's the story we heard. I do remember that we played the whole run without the tent, inside the stadium itself."[16]

Again, Barbara's recollection was not only spot on, but reiterated in Steven R. Weisman's article that appeared in *The New York Times* a couple of days after the show opened.



The front cover of the 1973 Miller-Johnson Circus souvenir program and magazine. Loni's lantern trick is included in the busy montage, to the immediate right of the clown's portrait. This same image was used on window cards and one-sheet posters, where it included the slogan "A RETURN TO THE RICH TRADITION OF THE CIRCUS AS IT ONCE WAS IN AMERICA."

> A circus that came to town Saturday barely got its wild animals out of their cages, its clowns into their costumes and its aerial acts off the ground—through no fault of its own.
>
> For the Miller-Johnson Circus limped into Flushing Meadow Park during the day with at least four of its trucks, containing props, costumes and animals, broken down on the Pennsylvania Turnpike. By nightfall, hundreds of children and their parents sat waiting for the show to begin in Louis Armstrong Memorial Stadium, unaware that, backstage, no one knew for sure what would begin and when.
>
> Yet the circus's problems hardly seemed to matter. Youngsters squealed at the trapeze artistry of a 9-year-old boy and his family, laughed loudly at the clowns and cheered with gusto at a succession of performing lions, tigers, bears, chimps and elephants trained by Pat Anthony.
>
> Clearly, the show had more than enough going for it to compensate for its opening night adversities. Perhaps its biggest asset was that the Miller-Johnson Circus was not of the garden variety—Madison Square Garden, that is. It was small enough, for instance, for the audience to see the pained, tense or humorous expressions on the performers' faces.[17]

If three weeks in one place offered anything for Vargas and his cohorts, it was a well-deserved pause from driving. His wish to lug his gargantuan outfit cross-country certainly came true, but after eight solid months of touring, he was now on the opposite end of the map and had to get it all back to west coast by the end of November. With only one day off to reach its next destination, the big show was on the move again, making a 600-mile trip from NYC to Kingsport, Tennessee, where the show opened on October 2. Two days later the show was in Decatur, Illinois, then Clinton, Iowa, on October 5, followed by Dubuque, then Springfield, Missouri, on October 8-9. A news clipping from *The Springfield News Leader*, confirmed the fact that the show worked without the tent: "The only thing missing to make the circus replica of days gone by was the promised big top for the 3-ring acts."[18] The top was, however, definitely in place for the next stand in Hazelwood, just outside of Saint Louis, from October 11 through 14. A full-page photo feature focusing on the tent being erected for that date ran the following Saturday in *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*.[19]

I asked Barbara if she had any memory of stopping at their property in Highland during the few days surrounding the Hazelwood engagement. "If we did, and I really don't remember for sure, it couldn't have been for more than overnight, maybe on the drive from Springfield to Hazelwood. There really wasn't any time." She continued, pointing out that "the [daily show] schedule was usually pretty frantic to begin with. Vargas was in love with three and four-show days, so we were always working. And whenever we weren't working, I was busy with school and trying to practice [foot juggling]."[20]

I remember Loni mentioning the same thing years earlier. "We did a lot of four-show Saturdays on Vargas, starting at 10:00 o'clock in the morning, then two afternoon shows, and a night show at 8:00 or 8:30, and a lot of times we would do three shows on Friday and three on Sunday, as well. There wasn't much time for anything else… except sleep and drive to the next town."[21] And that's exactly what Loni, Freddie, and Barbara did on the heels of their few days around suburban Saint Louis: drive—nearly 900 miles—to Cheyenne, Wyoming, for their next show on October 17.

The remaining five weeks of the circuit zigzagged dramatically from Wyoming to Albuquerque (October 20-21), and then back north again into Blackfoot (24-25) and Boise, Idaho (26). Two dates in Oregon followed: Portland, from November 2-5, and Salem on November 6, and then finally back into California, showing in Hayward on November 9-12, Santa Rosa on November 16-17, and Sacramento November 20-24.

The Miller-Johnson Circus played its final two days of the 1973 season at the Salt Palace in Salt Lake City, Utah, November 26 and 27.[22] It took to the road again in mid-January 1974 under its official new title, Circus Vargas. Having driven what seemed like three seasons' mileage in one, Loni and Freddie decided to "return to their own rich tradition," of spot dating for the coming year.

Perhaps more so than with any other traveling circus to date, a year with Miller-Johnson put Loni and Freddie, and more-than-likely just about everyone else who followed that trail, through an exhausting pace. Though no strangers to constantly driving back and forth all year long, the excessive mileage and tightness of the Vargas route must have had

An extended circus family. Clockwise: Semon and Susan Martinez fuss over their baby girl Juliana, while Barry Sloan, Loni, and Clifford Vargas look on. This candid snapshot was taken in November 1973.

everyone biting their nails at some point throughout the tour. Completing the tour from start to finish had to feel victorious, once you regained consciousness, that is.

Returning to Highland just before the holidays, Freddie rekindled his relationship with his typewriter and was busily corresponding with agents old and new, setting hotel, sports show, and circus engagements for the new year. In the midst of corresponding and inspired by a product that he had seen in recent print ads and television commercials, Freddie composed a letter addressed to "L'Eggs Products, Inc.," located in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and sent to the "Attention[of]: Advertising Dept.," on January 16, 1974. The letter read…

Dear Sir:

Enclosed I send you several publicity photographs of one of the more unusual circus-acts in show business, professionally known as "MISS LONI", foot-juggler.

Because of the uncommon aspect of Loni's specialty and because the very movements the art of foot-juggling could demonstrate, in a catching and attention-getting way, the excellent fit and exceptional cling of your product without restricting complete freedom of movement, it appears that Miss Loni's remarkably graceful skill could be applied for a novel and strikingly different television commercial.

May I ask you for your viewpoint in this matter, or otherwise, may I suggest that this letter be forwarded to the advertising agency that handles the L'Eggs Products account?

Thank you very much,

Sincerely,

for: Miss Loni

Fred J. Van Voorden[23]

And remembering, myself, the old L'Eggs commercials from back in the day, their jingle stated, "Nothing beats a great pair of L'Eggs," Freddie instantly made the connection. One month later, on February 15, a reply from Chick Coate, a Marketing Assistant for the company communicated:

> Dear Mr. Van Voorden,
>
> I do agree that Miss Loni possesses a remarkable skill which could be applicable to our product characteristics. However, at this time, we will be unable to incorporate anything new into our already planned advertising program. Thank you for contacting L'EGGS Products, Inc.
>
> Sincerely,
>
> Chick Coate[24]

Thanks, but no thanks, is what it came down to from Coate's viewpoint. But Freddie, Loni's number-one fan and manager supreme, deserved a lot of credit for once again thinking outside of the box. I am sure he felt that the corporation passing up this unparalleled opportunity was, indeed, their loss.

Freddie concentrated on making 1974 a bit more relaxing for his Dutch wonder. Miss Loni kicked, flipped, and spun her props countless times in center-ring spotlights, on theater stages and in hotel showrooms throughout the Midwest spring and summer. At the beginning of April, among the offers coming in for future bookings, was a call from Eugene Lambert, a Sarasota-based agent working on behalf of Hubert Castle, who was again hoping to secure Loni for his 1975 tour.

Castle remembered seeing Barbara as she practiced on the sidelines during his 1972 tour and wondered if she, too, could be ready for the following season. He wanted to feature a three-ring foot juggling display with Loni in the center ring, Barbara in one end ring, and another—penciled-in, but not yet signed—in the opposite. Both Loni and Freddie were surprised by Lambert's query at first as they did not realize that Castle had paid any attention to Barbara's early stages of practice. Undoubtedly, he had, and furthermore had confidence that she must have become fairly well polished, although he had not yet seen or heard of Barbara actually presenting an act in public.

In the blink of an eye, and with little time for much additional discussion, a contract dated April 3, 1974, assuring "a minimum guarantee [of] twenty-five weeks; starting on or about January 25th, 1975" and calling for "two acts as follows: Miss Loni, foot juggling [and] 2. Miss Barbara, foot juggling" was on its way to the Van Voorden residence in Highland, Illinois. Lambert's letter accompanying the agreement stated,

> "Also please send me some photos as soon as possible of both acts. Even if Barbara only poses with the cushion and props for a start.
>
> I am not sure if you want to call it [the second act] Miss Barbara, so I left it blank and please fill in on the contract."[25]

Freddie signed and returned the contracts on April 7th. In a cover letter with the documents, he wrote to Lambert,

> "Loni's photographs will be at your office within a few weeks; please allow me a little longer for Barbara's photos, although you'll receive them within a reasonable amount of time, say about
>
> 1-½ or two months at the most.
>
> We still think this whole thing is a terrific idea of yours. The display is going to be a hit, you'll see."[26]

Loni started sewing and Freddie began fabricating a second set of props. This was certainly not the first time in circus history that a contract had been signed for an act that did not yet exist. To this very day such practices still happen more frequently than you might imagine. Barbara had less than a year to "get her act together," and less than a month to have it photographed.

Freddie's focus soon shifted when it came to securing dates for the fall. Although Loni still played a significant number of engagements over the following months, the couple stayed closer to home, preparing for the approaching Castle season. When they did venture out on dates, Barbara usually stayed behind to practice. Sometime in May, Freddie booked a sitting with a local studio in Highland to photograph Barbara's still non-existent act. Barbara recalled, "the guy was basically a wedding photographer, and he did senior portraits, too. He had a little storefront with not much ceiling height, so trying to get pictures [of me] doing any tricks was awkward."[27] They ended up with one acceptable pose shot and a couple of mediocre staged action images, crudely airbrushed, to try

Loni and Freddie's daughter Barbara made her foot juggling debut in Fort Wayne, Indiana, at the Hubert Castle-produced Mizpah Shrine Circus. This pair of publicity pictures—her first ever, and the best a small-town wedding photographer could produce under limited circumstances—nowhere near reflected just how ready she really was when that whistle blew on January 31, 1975.

and remove door and window frames and such from the background. Someone on Castle's end doctored up the pictures as much as they could, but they still left much to be desired.

Hubert Castle's season opened in Grand Rapids, Michigan, January 20, 1975 with a six-day run, but for some reason Loni, Freddie and Barbara did not play that particular date. Barbara thought that Loni may have had a previous engagement somewhere that she could not break. Instead, the moment of truth arrived on January 31, 1975, when the Mizpah Shrine Circus, produced by Hubert Castle, opened to a near capacity crowd in Fort Wayne, Indiana.

As was the case in both 1971 and 1972, the show was top-heavy with talent from beginning to end. Positioned about midway through the first half of the program came "Three Lovely Young Ladies Performing Amazing Feats with Their Feet": in ring one, MISS BARBARA - in ring two, MISS LONI - and in ring three, MISS LILIAN [Hergotova].

As Freddie predicted, the display was an instant success. "I felt pretty solid [with the act] by the time we opened, but I was still nervous as hell. Fort Wayne was a huge and important date; I kept telling myself 'I'd better not drop'," Barbara confessed. "But once that first night was over, I felt pretty good from then on." [28] Barbara remembered when Hubert Castle came up to her immediately after her debut with praise and congratulations. "He was a real gentleman," she said.

Like the Miller-Johnson route of 1973, Castle's ambitious itinerary ricocheted across the states, as well as in and out of Canada a few times; again, not always in the most practical of patterns, but at least with more reasonable time allotted in between major jumps. The steady work kept Loni in her usual "top shelf" performing condition, and it did wonders building up Barbara's endurance. That spring *The Red Deer Advocate*, in Alberta, Canada, reported, "The most popular balancing act on the program was the female trio of Miss Barbara, Miss Loni and Miss Lillian." [29] People everywhere were talking about Castle's three rings of foot juggling.

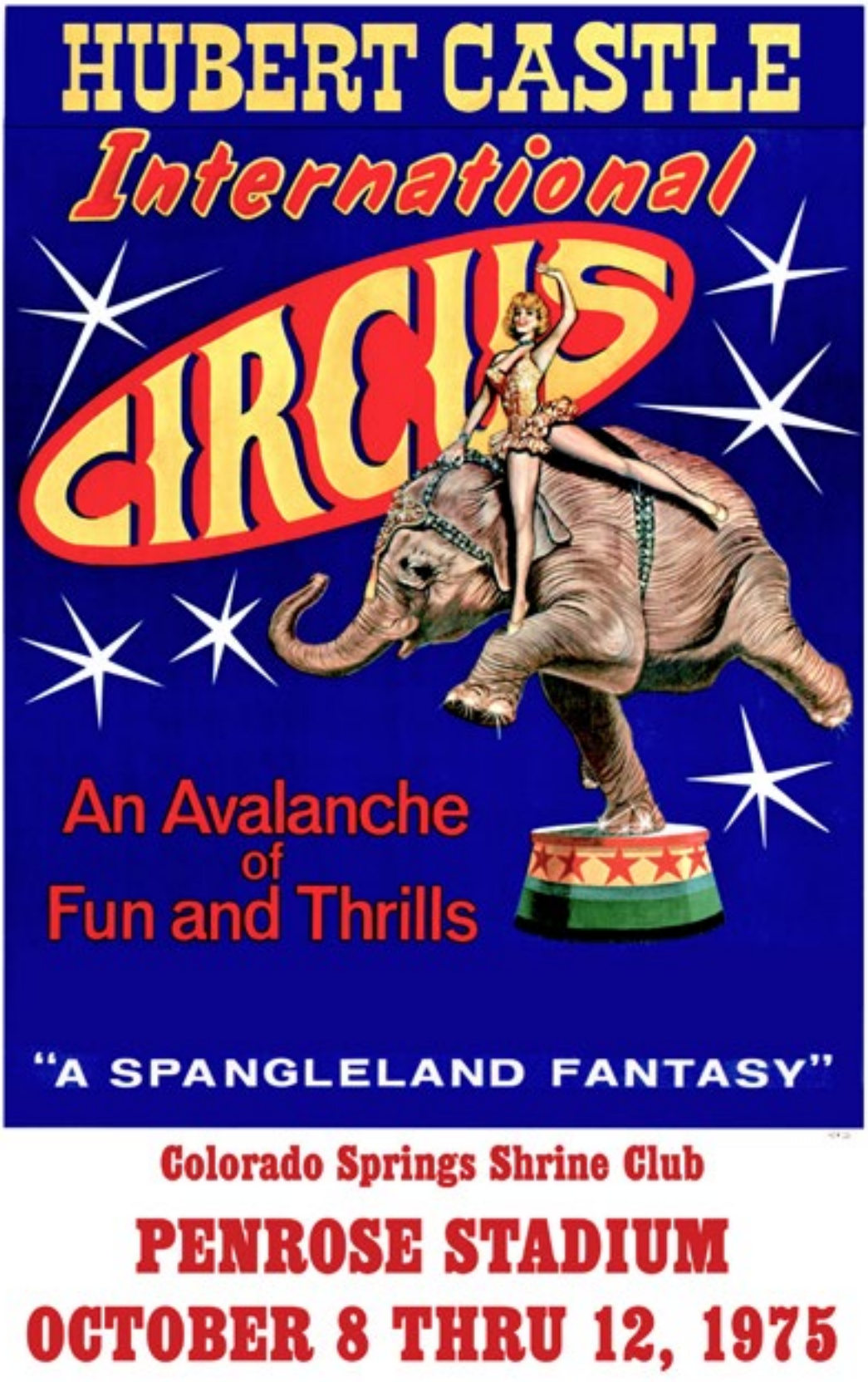
Clifford Vargas had also heard about it and wanted the display for his "All-New 1976 International Edition." Vargas wasted no time contacting Freddie and Loni to strike up a deal, assuring them that his route

had been revised completely and far more practically.

Freddie was all ears. The show would open in California the first week in January, then move south to Alabama and Texas for about five weeks or so, but with a couple of weeks off in between, to move everyone and everything across the map more comfortably. It would work its way to the Midwest by mid-June, then into Canada for several weeks, crossing back into the United States in New York by late September, and back in California by mid-December. Vargas offered amazingly good money for the two acts with a guarantee of forty paid weeks, plus a ten-week option. It was impossible to pass it by.[30]

The contract from Vargas's San Leandro, California, office was postmarked June 20, 1975, and forwarded immediately to Loni and Freddie along the Castle route. When Vargas received the completed agreement, he then contracted with Lillian Hergotova to even out ring three of the display, just as it had appeared with Hubert Castle. Freddie, Miss Loni, and Miss Barbara would again be Vargas-bound.

Castle's tour reached its end in Utica, New York, on October 25, and the Van Voordens returned home shortly thereafter. Loni had only a few Midwest holiday bookings lined up, and after the long, steady trek they had just finished, she was content to take it a easy.[31] Loni's mother was suffering from health issues now and residing in an assisted living facility in Highland, so it was important that the family stayed close to home for what little time they could. It would not be all that long before they were in the thick of another lengthy



A striking window card poster (14"x22") for Hubert Castle's five-day stand in Colorado Springs, Colorado, in the fall of 1975.

season, and there was plenty of preparation during their two months in Highland. Just after Christmas they headed to Alameda, California, for a January 3 opening with Circus Vargas.

As feverish as Loni, Freddie, and Barbara's last go-around with Vargas's Miller-Johnson Circus was, there was something inexplicably captivating about returning "to the scene of the crime." Of course, there were similarities to the 1973 tour, but by now many of those initial wrinkles had been ironed out.

As the season slowly unfurled, it became clear that more attention to detail had been implemented, particularly in the way the itinerary had been laid out. Soon weeks were absorbed into months, and the show ambled its way across the roadways from state to province to state. The daily routine was still rigid though: work, work, work. Loni absolutely loved it. She was always happiest when doing the act. In addition to performing, Barbara worked in the office every day, counting and straightening out box-office money after every show. What little free time remained was spent on her schoolwork, or tutoring Wally Naghtin, Jr., one of the show kids.

Circus Vargas crossed into Canada during the first week of July, where it toured for the next ten weeks, returning stateside once again in mid-September. The show closed in Garland, Texas, one month later on October 12. Then after, four days off, the circus headed back to Petaluma, California, for an October 16 opening.[32] But the Petaluma stand would miss two foot jugglers.

As the family was preparing to head west, Loni received a call from the facility where her mother was living. The prognosis was not good. Freddie explained the situation to Vargas; they had to return to Highland immediately but would meet up with the show in California as soon as possible. Barbara Abeen,

Miss Loni's cylinder was fashioned to resemble a gigantic cigarette. Particularly along the nightclub circuit, that visual was a big hit and, like her light-up lanterns, became somewhat of an iconic prop for the Dutch sensation. When America started thinking twice about promoting smoking as a fashionable habit, the prop was redecorated.

Another wonderful image of Miss Loni in all her glory, running her four-pointed cross in Vargas's center ring. Freddie, who built all of her and Barbara's props and equipment, fabricated slightly different apparatuses that spun flat on the end-ring jugglers' feet, but matched in design.

Loni's mother and Barbara Ann's namesake, took her final breath on October 19.

Loni, Freddie, and Barbara rejoined the circus in California and finished the season in late October. Before Loni's mother passed, Vargas had already discussed a return the following year, and the deal was soon confirmed. The act fit in well on the show, and Vargas himself seemed to take a personal liking to all three. The money was good, and the tour was long and nowhere near as incoherent as in the Miller-Johnson days. It made perfect sense to come back. The 1976 season closed December 14 at Woodland, California, and the 1977 tour began two-and-a half weeks later, in Atlanta, on January 7.

From Georgia to Mississippi and then straight into Texas, the show spent just over nine collective weeks in the south before heading west. There were several familiar faces returning to the program as well as many new acts, just enough to keep everything fresh and exciting. There was again a three-ring foot juggling display with Miss Loni reigning supreme in the center and Miss Barbara in one of the opposite end rings. This time around, however, the third ring was occupied by a male antipodist from south of the border, identified in the program simply as Reuben. He was married to Señorita Magaly, who performed a head-balancing trapeze turn early in the program.

Barbara and Loni waiting for their cue in the backyard of Circus Vargas, somewhere along the grueling 1977 itinerary

While Barbara could not recall a last name for either, she vividly remembered Reuben's terribly unflattering baggy one-piece costume. What was worse, Miss Barbara was draped in matching apparel, for the visual symmetry. Vargas's idea: both end rings should have the same costumes, so that Miss Loni really stood out.

I visited the show a couple of times along the route, in between dates with my family's circus, and have rather vivid memories of that very display. By no fault of her own, Barbara somewhat resembled a chimneysweep, wearing eyeshadow and lipstick.

"America's Big Top Giant"—a slogan that Vargas would soon adopt and attach to everything in sight—was on the doorstep of an eight-week romp through California during the months of April and May. During the first weekend in June it invaded the west coast of Canada, at Vancouver, British Columbia, and then wiggled its way across Ontario, Quebec, and into

the Maritimes, crossing the border into the United States at the end of September.

When the show was in New Brunswick near the end of the tour, Loni was depositing a bag of trash in a nearby garbage dumpster when she suddenly caught her foot on a piece of rope stretched low across the tarmac. As she tried to break the fall with her hands, she ended up breaking her wrists instead, both of them.

One of the working men saw her tumble and raced over to help. In addition to the two injured wrists, she also had a nasty cut above her left eye, when the lens of her glasses shattered on impact. She was led back to her trailer, where Freddie quickly bundled her up and drove her to the nearest hospital for x-rays. Loni returned to the lot later that evening with both arms in casts, one up to her elbow and the other almost to her shoulder.

"She arrived at the emergency room covered in blood from her cut and with two broken wrists and explained that she was in town with the circus," Barbara recalled. "The hospital staff was obviously expecting a more exciting story behind her injuries than just that she was throwing away the trash!" [33] What upset Loni the most, though, was the fact that she would not be able to work for a while. She tried lying back on her cradle the next afternoon, but the cast to her upper arm limited her movement completely.

At first Barbara and Reuben worked alone in the two end rings. Eventually, Loni's wrists improved to the point where the full cast could be cut down to just below her elbow, so she had matching casts on her forearms and was now able to bend both elbows. Anna Delmonte, a close friend to Loni since their Ringling days, was in charge of Vargas's wardrobe department and whipped up a pair of feathered and sequined sleeves to cover over the casts, and by the end of the week, Miss Loni was back in action in the center ring.

Long-time friend Billy Barton somewhat embellished the story in his December 5 column in *The Circus Report*, reporting that she was dropping off the trash on her way to spec when she went down. According to Barton, when Cliff Vargas learned of the accident, he flamboyantly remarked "My God! Loni!, What were you doing? No lady of quality ever carries her own garbage!"[34] By mid-November Loni's injuries had healed and on December 14 she finished the season in Melbourne, Florida.

Another circus year had passed by. The next one – in Vargasland, anyway – would start in just sixteen days. The 1978 season kicked off December 30, 1977, in Clearwater, Florida. After closing January 1, the show and immediately hit the highway. Loni and Freddie agreed to do it all over again, and Barbara continued with them.

Vargas had made significant personnel changes for the new edition. In addition to the new performers there were a handful of new front-end people. Freddie was also given the title superintendent, of what, not even Freddie was certain. His new title and the duties that went along with it were never explained to him.

Barbara remembered, "Vargas seemed very preoccupied and distracted all of a sudden. He was still Vargas; he was always kind of nuts, but there was more of a distance this time around."[35]

As time progressed and the route continued into the spring, it was evident that there were some power struggles around the lot. Working in the office in between shows, Barbara, too, began noticing some unusual conduct between various department heads and the front end. "There was a lot of whispering and looking around taking place," she said. [36] Whatever was brewing came to a head in late May. Barbara really never knew much about the details and she said that Freddie would never really talk about it. "He felt terribly betrayed." [37] There exists in Loni and Freddie's files, a contract, "made this 25th day of February 1978 between Circus Vargas Corp., and Loni & Fred Van Voorden & Barbara Ann… for the 1978 season." No further dates or terms are given or implied, and no signatures of any parties whatsoever are inscribed.[38] It is an unusual fragment from a man who was once so focused on securing his people a year or more in advance.

The 1978 season opened two days prior to January 1, 1978. Loni, Freddie, and Barbara stayed on the show until at least the end of April. This detail can be traced to a feature story and interview with Loni in *The San Francisco Sunday Examiner on April 30. The reporter, David Kleinberg mentions,*

> *"She met her husband-to-be in 1948 (he was the manager of the USO tour troupe she was with), and the two are still married today (he's an administrator with the Vargas show.)"*[39]

Not long afterward Freddie gathered up Loni and Barbara's props, and after saying farewell they began the long trek back to Highland, Illinois. Billy Barton's weekly column in the *Circus Report of June 12 simply mentioned,* "Word is that Fred and Loni Van Voorden are no longer with Circus Vargas." [40]

Although Freddie tried to line up some fall dates for Loni and Barbara, at the time there was not much to be had. After six-and-a-half consecutive seasons on the road, working nonstop for both Hubert Castle and Cliff Vargas, Loni welcomed a bit of down time. Still, Loni and Barbara practiced almost every day to stay in shape, and eventually a handful of bookings came in for the fall.

Freddie's trouping days were done. He stayed at home to book dates for his girls, and while he would accompany them to an occasional engagement if it was relatively close to home, he never again went back on the road. He eventually took a local job at the Wicks Organ Factory in Highland.

Freddie soon accumulated ten signed and returned contracts for Miss Loni and "Miss Barbara Van," all Shrine and Police Circus dates, beginning in late January 1979, and carrying on into the spring and summer.

Hubert Castle was eager to welcome his foot juggling favorites back for a number of engagements, and the same sentiments were expressed by producers Sam Polack, Eddie Zacchini, Ralph Zarnow, and Grace McIntosh.[41]

Although the world of circus spot-dating had begun thinning out a bit during the time Loni and Barbara were running themselves ragged on forty and fifty-week seasons, they had a good jump start to 1979 secured, thanks to Freddie's expertise, and they kept plenty busy for a few years into another new decade.

In April 1980, a small little circus with a great big name—the TNT & Royal Olympic Circus—opened its season at the Towne East Mall, in Mesquite, Texas. I was there. It was my father's show.

From The Greatest Show on Earth to one of the smallest shows on earth, Miss Loni is pictured in the modest single ring of the TNT & Royal Olympic Circus at the Pennyrile Mall in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, June 1980. Her assistant is Mary Bryant, Barbara Ann's closest friend since childhood. Mary filled in as Loni's assistant while Barbara was away in Europe with the Harlem Globetrotters.

Photo by Charles Jackson, Tegge Circus Archives.

Barbara returned to the TNT & Royal Olympic route from her tour with the Harlem Globetrotters in early July. By then she was four or five months pregnant. She continued to work until mid-September, when her mother then stepped in to finish out the season due to Barbara's "delicate condition." Barbara then assisted Loni. This photo was taken at the Metcalf South Shopping Center, a high-fashion enclosed mall, in Overland Park, Kansas, September 1980.

On the bill was a foot juggler named Barbara Van, booked to play the entire season, through November 1. Although we had never met before April 1, I knew all about her and her legendary mother, Miss Loni as I had seen both several times over the years on Vargas.

When the date in Mesquite ended on April 5, my folks and I returned to California for some west coast engagements. Barbara rejoined us in Mankato, Minnesota, in May.

In the few weeks she was away from the TNT & Royal Olympic Circus, an agent for the Harlem Globetrotters saw her act and offered her a two-month European tour. We agreed to let her out of our contract

The cast of the 1980 TNT & Royal Olympic Circus in Decatur, Illinois, October 25, 1980. From left to right: Carol and Carlos Obando, Louise and Earl Tegge, Loni Van Voorden. Gary and Vicki Baker. Front row (kneeling/on floor): Gena Stinnett, Timothy Tegge (in white face), Barbara Van Voorden. Seated in my lap is Pamela Obando.

for two months, provided they could arrange for an acceptable replacement. That replacement was Miss Loni. We signed the necessary paperwork, and for the next several weeks, that small little circus presented one of the greatest attractions the show world ever produced.

Loni was all class. From the moment she entered the ring you could not take your eyes off of her. Every single move was graceful and perfect. Just removing her shoes to do her signature lantern trick was a sensation. And, at the conclusion of her act, she would always style to the audience, and then to the band. She always bowed the band, whether it was the 28-piece Ray Anthony Orchestra, or my mother on keyboards and me on drums. As long as I live, I will never forget how remarkable she was, both in the ring, and out. To those of you who may have seen her in person, I need not say more. To those of you who never had that pleasure, you have no idea what you missed.

And whoever is onstage up in the clouds tonight, you can bet that Miss Loni is sharing the bill with them, kicking, flipping, and spinning her heart out.

Endnotes

1. Contract between Hubert Castle and Miss Loni, dated November 12, 1970, Tegge Circus Archives.

2. "Miss Loni" business correspondence and contracts, Tegge Circus Archives.

3. Ibid.

4. "Traditional Spring Frolic Staged as Shrine Circus Opens at Auditorium," T*he Sioux City Journal* (Sioux City, Iowa), Apr.14, 1971, p. C-4.

5. Ibid.

6. "Trailer Park Is Turned into Dump," *Chicago Tribune*, Nov. 12, 1972, p. 6.

7. Notes from conversations with Barbara Tegge by Timothy Noel Tegge in Baraboo, Wisconsin, 2020-2023

8. Gizeh Shrine Circus souvenir program. Vancouver, British Columbia, June 23-25, 1972, Tegge Circus Archives.

9. "Vargas' Love for Big Top Salvaged Circus 20 Years Ago," *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 13, 1989, p. 85.

10. Caption from original Miller-Johnson Circus one-sheet poster, 1973, Tegge Circus Archives.

11. Contract between Clifford E. Vargas/Miller-Johnson Circus and Miss Loni, dated July 11, 1972, Tegge Circus Archives.

12. Notes from conversations with Barbara Tegge, op-cit..

13. Accumulated routes for Miller-Johnson Circus, as recorded in *The Circus Report*, Volume 2, 1973, and *Amusement Business*, Volume 85, 1973 periodicals, Tegge Circus Archives.

14. Notes from conversations with Barbara Tegge, op-cit.

15. Accumulated routes for Miller-Johnson Circus, op-cit.

16. Notes from conversations with Barbara Tegge, op-cit.

17. "Boy, 9, Is Star of Miller Johnson Circus," *The New York Times*, Sep. 10, 1973, p. 43.

18. "Full House Enjoys Circus," *The Springfield News Leader* (Springfield, Missouri), Oct. 9, 1973, p. 6.

19. "Erecting Big Top A Large Order," *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (St. Louis, Missouri), Oct. 20, 1973, p. 13.

20. Notes from conversations with Barbara Tegge, op-cit.

21. Loni Van Voorden, personal interview conducted by Timothy Noel Tegge in Highland, Illinois, Mar. 15, 2007.

22. Accumulated routes for Miller-Johnson Circus, op-cit.

23. "Miss Loni" business correspondence and contracts, op-cit.

24. Ibid.

25. Contract between Hubert Castle and Miss Loni, dated April 3, 1974, Tegge Circus Archives.; "Miss Loni" business correspondence with Eugene Lambert, agent, dated April 3, 1974, Tegge Circus Archives.

26. "Miss Loni" business correspondence with Eugene Lambert, agent, dated April 7, 1974, Tegge Circus Archives.

27. Notes from conversations with Barbara Tegge, op-cit.

28. Ibid.

29. "Acrobatics a Highlight At Circus," *The Red Deer Advocate* (Red Deer, Alberta, Canada), May 27, 1975, p. 3.

30. Contract between Clifford E. Vargas and Miss Loni, dated May 20, 1975, Tegge Circus Archives.

31. Hubert Castle Circus Official Route Card number 7, 1975, Tegge Circus Archives.

32. Accumulated routes for Circus Vargas, op-cit.

33. Notes from conversations with Barbara Tegge, op-cit.

34. "Billy Barton" - Column, *The Circus Report*, Dec. 5, 1977, Volume 6, Number 49.

35. Notes from conversations with Barbara Tegge, op-cit.

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid.

38. Contract, incomplete, between Clifford E. Vargas and Miss Loni, dated February 28, 1978, Tegge Circus Archives.

39. "Loni Has No Complaints Juggling Through Life," *The San Francisco Sunday Examiner*, Apr. 30, 1978, pp. 26, 30.

40. "Billy Barton" - Column, *The Circus Report*, June 12, 1978, Volume 7, Number 24.

41. "Miss Loni" business correspondence and contracts, op-cit.

Loni continued to perform until about 1986. She was 60 years of age at the time. By then the circus industry had thinned out considerably, offering fewer and further-between spot dates of any quality left to play. The greater majority of producers were now looking for acts that could do two or more individual turns in a program, and for any women affiliated with said acts to also do web. Since Freddie was no longer accompanying his wife on most trips away—she decided it was probably time to deflate her ball, pack away her four-pointed cross, and retire her fur-trimmed costumes once and for all.

Frederik Jan Van Voorden died on March 27, 2002. Ten years later, his beloved Loni met up with him. Both are buried at the Highland Cemetery. Loni's mother, Barbara Abeen, is also at rest there.

Circus World Museum, Wisconsin Historical Society